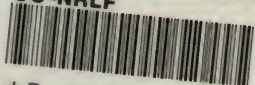


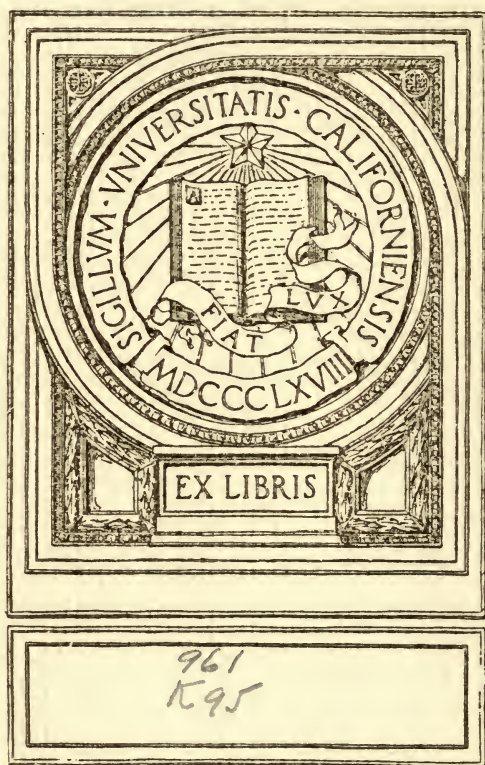
ERNA VITEK

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ERNA VITEK

I

Three young men, the best of friends, a painter, Bainbridge Breen, a writer, Eric Nielsen, and a composer, John Carstairs, were arguing that three-faced conundrum, morals. Quite an accident had provoked them to it: a waitress, Erna Vitek. From picking at her they had launched into axiomizing, only to come back to her. Her morals were the vital topic of the evening. Carstairs' studio provided the *mise en scène*.

"Well, we've hit a conclusion at last," said Breen with an air of comfortable finality. "Carstairs calls her moral, I say she's unmoral, and Nielsen that she may be moral, unmoral or even both."

"Yes!"

"Now, we've all conceded that Erna's not immoral—at least she doesn't lead a life inconsistent with morality?"

"Yes!"

"Very well then," Breen concluded contentedly. "Now let me make a proposition."

"What kind of a proposition?" Nielson quizzed

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in droll tones and looked at Carstairs, who was frowning.

"There's very little to it. I can dish it out in a few words. It's simply this: that we put Erna to the test."

"What do you mean?" was Carstairs' immediate challenge.

"Don't worry!" Breen responded blandly. "I'm not going to injure the girl."

"Well, what did you mean—"

"Merely this," the painter interrupted quietly. "I don't believe that any of us know her very well. She's only been working at Landsmann's a few months. Of course, Carstairs, you've taken her out on one or two occasions, so you've had an opportunity of studying her at closer range."

"Not of studying her!"

"You don't study her, certainly. You—er—what would you call it, Nielsen?"

"Why, John has been burned a little by the divine flame."

Carstairs blushed angrily. "If you fellows intend to be personal—"

"Never mind, John," Nielsen cut in. "You must allow us the occasional escape of some of our surplus wind. Now, let's drop these bravado poses and get down to business. I want the rest of the

proposition. We know that we're to put Erna to the test. Now, Breen, tell us how."

"There's nothing to explain. I said, put her to the test. Let each one, in his own way and for himself, perhaps, pay her attentions—I don't mean, make love to her—but simply, well, let him take her to the theatre or to supper some evening—she's free nights—and find out how close he can get to her—I don't mean seduction—but that he penetrate her character. Let each, in his own way, learn for himself, and later we'll compare notes and decide whether the respected lady has the moral or the unmoral tendency or even whether she might develop an—er—"

"See here, Breen!" Carstairs exploded.

"Oh, I'd forgotten that we agreed to throw that out," the painter apologized. "You see, I couldn't help thinking of that little affair with the young prize ring gladiator. What was his name? Allen!"

"But that was only a temptation," Carstairs fought back.

"Of course, only a temptation. But we have only her word that it never proved more."

The composer was ready with a hot retaliation when Nielsen interposed: "Now don't let's revert to that topic again, Breen. We can never know the whole story, and it only annoys John to refer to it

We know that Erna was down and out at the time—she'd just come to Landsmann's, was unsettled and that sort of thing—that much we know and that young Allen followed her there with an offer of cash. At least, she intimated something like that to John and said it was a case of being good or bad then and there. She chose being good. Even if she had chosen the other, the transaction might have been an unmoral and not an immoral one, for she was fond of Allen."

"But—"

"Now never mind, Breen! We've threshed that out often enough. Erna didn't flop—in fact, she showed Mr. Allen the door, hasn't seen him since and—"

"But we have only *her* word for all that stuff."

"All right. There's no other to contradict."

Breen, although silenced, was busy reflecting; Carstairs' ire was appeased. Nielsen concluded: "Let's take up Breen's proposition, John, each in his own way, whatever that may be, and then we'll compare notes some day and settle the business. After all, Erna's only a waitress; we needn't spend more than an ordinary amount of excitement over her."

"But she isn't a waitress. I tell you, she's a woman."

"All right, woman let her be," Nielsen conceded gracefully. "Now, we-don't want to sit here throwing words and phrases around all evening. We've been at it too long as it is. Why not put the matter to a vote and then drop it?"

"Yes."

"Breen, of course, votes that we put her to the test. Will you vote that way too?"

Carstairs gave in with an effort.

"Fine!" Nielsen applauded. "I'll vote 'yes' too."

"Motion proposed and carried that one Erna Vitek, employed as waitress at the Café Landsmann—"

"That'll do, Breen. We've had enough of your eloquence for one evening. You've given me a headache. Besides, I'm sick of this subject. Let's start something else."

Breen laughed his ever-ready, self-satisfied laugh, and Nielsen, and even Carstairs, joined him. Presently, the studio slept the sleep of the unperturbed. Carefully, Breen filled his pipe and began a deliberate puffing, while Nielsen introduced some new anecdote in his droll, even-tempered way. Carstairs, on the other hand, was meditating gloomily: in an hour or so he would be due at that damnable hole, the Phoenix Music Hall—where he earned his

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bread playing accompaniments. A second thought cheered him not a little. He would still have time to eat his supper at Landsmann's.

II

"Erna! What is the matter with you? Another cup of coffee for Mr. Nolan!"

"I know it. I ordered it an hour ago."

The stocky, middle-aged, stolid-faced German stared at the handsome sensual girl of twenty, muttered something, as she returned his critical stare with a defiant one, and passed out of the kitchen into the store.

"What is the matter with Erna to-day?" he demanded of his stocky, middle-aged, stolid-faced wife, who stood behind the counter waiting on customers.

"Why?"

"This is the third time she has been *schmoozing* me."

"Oh, she has something on her mind," was the woman's unconcerned reply.

The storekeeper was not satisfied. "That *fellow* must be to blame," he said.

"Who?"

"That Allen! He's been coming here again."

"Has he?" the woman returned with the same unconcern. "Let him come. What do you care?"

Erna Vitek was in a morose humor. Her pugnacious nose seemed more pugnacious than ever, and even her mouth, usually so soft and yielding, appeared hard this morning. And her brown eyes, which could give you gentle glances one day and repelling ones the next, were filled with ominous signs. There was a good reason. She had just overheard the other waitresses exchanging remarks about her. This would not have been so bad if their talk had been without foundation. But it was true: she had been glad to see Jimmy Allen yesterday noon and evening, when he came in—after an absence of three months. He had stopped drinking. He had been living and training in the country, so that the old color had returned to his face and the old light to his eyes. He looked stronger than ever, more energetic and happier. Yes, he was to begin fighting again—next week—but that had never been his worst fault. The girls said that she still “liked him” or that she would “like him again.” This would not have been so bad if—

Gretchen and Mollie were small, mean, dirty. They were always gossiping about her. And she had given them her old dresses, old hats, encouragement, advice. What a lot of gratitude women felt toward you!

Her face cleared. A laughing, splendidly built

young fellow was making his way through the store, returning salutations. He stopped in the kitchen long enough to barter laughing glances with Erna and passed down the two steps into the dining-room: a small low one containing six tables—Erna's empire. There, he received more greetings and one or two short tributes on his return to the public eye. The young athlete pulled off his coat and cap and hung them on the wall. He flung himself into a chair at an empty table and was soon at his ease.

Erna was a shrewd girl. She did not come to take his order at once. First, she served another patron. Then, she cleared away some dishes. Finally, she came to Jimmy's table, but with a careless air.

He gave her a frank look. "How's the girl?" was his familiar greeting.

"Pretty fair!" she responded in cool tones. "How are you?"

"Bully!"

"What do you want?" she went on indifferently.

"Gimme time to breathe!" he protested, and tried to stare into her face and to take her hand.

"Stop!" she warned him and drew back.

"Why, what the deuce—"

"Customers are waitin'—" she cut him short.

He gave the bill of fare a contemptuous glance.

"Bring me a soft boiled egg, toast an' a glass o' milk."

She looked at him with sudden irritation, but smiled, turned her back and left the room with aggravating slowness.

Jimmy appeared angry, but one of the patrons disturbed his mood with an admiring: "On a diet, Jimmy?"

"Yes."

"What night does it come off?"

"Next Tuesday."

"How do you feel?"

Jimmy expanded his chest, gave himself a solid punch and answered: "Great! Harder than a rock!"

"Feel sorry for 'the Kid.' How long are you goin' to let him stay?"

"Oh, part o' the second," was Jimmy's laughing assurance.

A sigh of pleasure and envy escaped the patrons. And they quickly announced their intention to be present at the joyous butchery.

Erna came back. She pretended to wipe off the neighboring table. Pretty soon, however, she was at Jimmy's side.

"What's the grouch?" he asked confidentially.

"Nothin'."

"Still sore at me?"

"No."

"Sore at somebody else?"

"No."

He looked up at her anxiously, but Erna smiled; her eyes softened and winked slyly. Jimmy, who was always willing to laugh, laughed again. "You're still the kiddo," he whispered.

Erna blushed and moved away.

"Erna!" he called.

"Wait a moment!"

She stayed away about two minutes and then returned with Jimmy's order, which was overdue. Three of the patrons, exchanging "so longs!" with the prize-fighter, went out. Two remained, milkmen, but they were fast asleep.

Erna set Jimmy's order before him. He tried to catch her hand, but she was too quick. An irritable grunt escaped him.

"What's the matter?" she taunted him.

"What's the matter with *you*?"

"Nothin'."

But she dropped her glance coquettishly. He gave her face and figure an admiring look.

"Erna," he said gently.

She looked at him for a shy instant.

"I say, Erna," he repeated.

"Well?"

"You're not sore?"

"No."

"Sure?"

"Yes."

"You know what I mean?"

"Sure!"

He studied her. "Then why do you treat me this way—now?"

She tried bold and bashful glances, turned her head a little and said enigmatically "Just because."

"Just because what?"

"Just because."

He shook his head, but his ever-ready laugh came to his assistance. "Then you're not sore?"

"No."

"Sure?"

"Of course."

"Even though—"

"Yes."

"Then you like to treat me this way just—"

"Sure."

"Why?"

"Just because!" she echoed and started to laugh.

He gave her an adoring glance and this time caught her hand. She tried to pull it away, but his grip was too powerful. He squeezed her hand.

"Don't, don't!" she begged in pain.

He let go and smiled. She was not angry. Instead, she placed her hand on his biceps. He raised his forearm and imprisoned her hand. "Oo-oo!" she sighed in happy homage, and her eyes shone.

Once more, he freed her hand. "Well?"

"Terrible!" she whispered. "What'll happen to the poor 'Kid'?"

"Death!" was his jovial rejoinder.

He caught her hand once more. "Don't, don't!" she warned him. He let go as before, but she did not withdraw it immediately.

His glance grew bolder and bolder, but he hesitated. He busied himself with his breakfast for a moment, shaking salt into his egg and stirring it with a spoon. He looked up and hesitated again. Finally, he began: "Then it'll be all right to-night?"

"To-night?"

"Yes. You said you'd tell me to-day."

"I know."

"It'll be all right?" he pleaded.

She eyed him a moment, softened a little and then gave in: "But where can we go?"

"We can take in a show," he suggested.

"A show?"

"Yes!"

"Where?"

"Oh, Miner's, the Gran' or a movie."

She meditated.

"Hurry up! Here come some customers."

She turned her head quickly, and then looked back at him. "All right," she whispered.

"Where'll I meet you?" he demanded eagerly.

"At the old corner—eight o'clock!"

He pressed her hand in hurried understanding, as three young men entered the dining-room. They were Breen, Carstairs and Nielsen. Erna passed them on her way out with a nervous "good-morning."

She stayed out some time. Jimmy ate and drank rapidly, got up, took his check, put on his cap and coat, and ignoring the newcomers, left the room. Breen and Nielsen had recognized him with amazement. They watched him curiously, but not so Carstairs. He sat there, staring gloomily at the table.

III

"Moral or unmoral, but not—" Breen started and waited for Nielsen to supply the last word.

Nielsen, who understood, shook his head and corrected: "Moral or unmoral—no more," and smiled confidently.

Carstairs looked from Nielsen to Breen and continued staring at the table.

"How do you account then for the recrudescence of our young gladiator?" Breen went on.

"And what has that to do with Erna's life, present or future?" Nelsen argued amiably.

"If he's calling again?"

"Let him call! Does that necessarily affect Erna's conduct?"

"But *hasn't* it affected her conduct? Didn't you notice it as we came in?"

"Yes."

"Well?"

Nielsen wore a thoughtful frown, but smiled mischievously and declared: "There was nothing *im*moral, as far as I could make out."

Breen was gracious enough to agree: "Perhaps not."

They were silent. Carstairs watched them gloomily and then returned to his occupation. Erna came in, affecting a matter-of-fact air.

Breen and Nielsen pressed her with playful greetings and compliments. She accepted them as part of the tribute due her each day, but her stereotyped expression disappeared, and she was ready to take up her duties as gracious empress. Even her pugnacious nose appeared less pugnacious. Having recognized the young men's tribute by a favor or two, she criticized genially: "You're late this morning."

"Nielsen overslept himself," Breen explained.

"Don't you believe him—he overslept himself," Nilsen retorted.

Erna was leaning against their table, her arms akimbo. The pair received a glance each, as was their due, and then she studied Carstairs. "Maybe it was you, Mr. Carstairs?"

He looked up. "Me?"

"Yes—maybe it was you that overslept yourself."

Carstairs blushed, his friends laughed, and he denied with a return of good nature: "No. They were the ones."

"He's not awake yet, Erna," Breen fought back.

"He doesn't look it," she seconded.

The young composer blushed again, but did not

defend himself this time. Nielsen eyed him with friendly concern.

"Your orders, gentlemen."

"What's your hurry?" Breen complained.

"You don't suppose I can stand here all day," she reminded him.

"But I want to admire you a little," he protested. "Who wants to eat in the presence of a—of a— Why, look at the beautiful red ribbon! Is it a new one, Erna?"

"Yes," and instantly, Erna, always susceptible to praise or flattery, raised her hands to arrange the ribbon.

"It matches your hair to perfection," Breen pursued. "You love color, don't you?"

"Sure."

"Red the most?"

"Sure."

"Blood, blood red?"

"Yes."

"My favorite color, too!"

"That'll do," Nielsen interposed. "Don't steal all the crumbs, Breen."

Erna laughed.

"But they belong to me," Breen defended himself. "Color is my line. Red is my color too."

"These grasping conceited painters!" Nielsen grumbled.

"No," Erna interceded. "If he likes red, he likes red."

"'A second Daniel'," quoted Breen. "I thank thee, gracious Lady. Thou and I are of one mind and desire. By the way, Erna! Did you ever wear all red?"

"No—oh, yes, two or three years ago."

"You did? Have you still got the dress?"

"Oh, I've outgrown it. I'm—I'm stouter now," and she expanded her chest and laughed again.

"But you must find it," he continued with growing interest. "You could easily alter it to fit, couldn't you? I want you to pose for me. You know you've promised me several times. Wouldn't you like to? All in red: red ribbon, red waist, and skirt and even red slippers, but best of all, red cheeks and red lips!"

Erna's pleasure-loving scent was aroused.

"Will you, Erna?"

"Sure!"

"When?"

"Oh, not to-day."

"When then?"

"Not to-morrow."

"Oh, pshaw—when then?"

"My first afternoon off?"

"Fine! When will that be?"

"Next Monday."

"Good! And you'll be ready?"

"Yes, if you really want me to. But I won't be able—"

"That's all right," he interrupted. "Come anyhow! You'll be immense just the same. You will create—"

"Pooh, pooh, and likewise tut, tut!" Nielsen broke in. "When are we to hear an end to this?"

"He's jealous," said Erna.

"Of course," Nielsen admitted. "To the painter go all the spoils. No one ever poses for a writer. It wouldn't be proper."

"Why?" she challenged.

Nielsen got up in a hurry. "What?" he demanded in mock seriousness.

"Order, order!" she said roguishly and looked away.

"But—"

"Order, order!" Breen echoed. "The lady is right. We must have order. Besides, we haven't ordered."

Nielsen fell back with a philosophic sigh. "All is unfair when bad puns make their appearance."

It did not take the young men long to make their choice of breakfast. Erna went away.

"Come back soon!" pleaded Breen.

"In a wink," she called back.

Breen started drumming on the table; Nielsen looked across at him and hummed a pleasant tune. "You're a clever individual," he observed.

"Why?"

"You're not going to have her pose, old Sly Fox."

"Certainly not, thou reader of souls."

"I thought not."

"But I'm only carrying out our program of last night. You seem to have forgotten it."

"No."

"Then why criticize me for being the first one on the job? It'll be up to you and Carstairs too."

"I know," Nielsen agreed jovially.

"Count me out!" Carstairs interrupted suddenly.

"The sleeper's awake," Breen applauded. "He's back from the land of dreams. What news from Arcadia, Colonel?"

"You can count me out," Carstairs repeated stubbornly, and would not look at his friends.

"Why, what's the matter?" Nielsen interposed sympathetically, and raised his hand to forewarn Breen.

"Nothing."

"Breen's only been fooling all along!"

"I know."

"Then you're not angry with him, or me?"

"No."

"Then what's the trouble?"

"I don't like it—I hate it," the young composer went on with difficulty.

"What don't you like?"

"This business!"

"What, this business of testing Erna?" Nielsen asked gently, and studied him. "John!" The latter refused to look at him. "It's all in fun. I thought you were satisfied with our arrangement? We are each to study Erna in our own way, then to compare notes to learn whether— You don't have to use Breen's method. I don't intend to. You don't have to either."

"I know."

"Then there ought to be no complaint."

"Count me out anyhow."

"Why?"

Breen wanted to poke into the argument, but Nielsen raised his hand again.

"She's not a waitress or a—or a working woman—or a table or a chair," Carstairs said with obvious difficulty.

Nielsen understood. He squeezed his neighbor's arm and declared with his most soothing tone: "She's a woman, of course—as we concluded last night.

Breen and I know that. You feel that we do, don't you?"

Carstairs, who was in his most sentimental mood, seemed on the verge of tears. "Yes," he managed to agree.

Nielsen broke off the subject at once. "Well, we'll talk over the whole business some other time. You're not feeling well this morning. It must be your work at that confounded moving picture hole."

"Yes," Carstairs said doubtfully.

"Cheer up!" Breen succeeded in interpolating. "Forget your troubles in the music world and listen to that concert over there. That duet recital, I should say."

Carstairs smiled.

"Tristan and Isolde are being undone," Nielsen added, catching Breen's cue. "Or Salome and Jokannan, eh? Away with Wagner and Strauss: Richard the First and Second—what do you say, John?"

"Yes."

The two milkmen, who were sleeping more soundly than ever, appreciated their listeners' applause. They were indulging in a crescendo.

"Silence and listen!" Breen warned so solemnly that Nielsen, and even Carstairs, laughed.

Breen and Nielsen exchanged nods. They had

accomplished their object. Erna came back with their orders.

"What music have we here?" Breen hailed her.

She set their orders on the table, and arranged their plates, knives, forks and spoons. "What did you say?"

"What music is this emanating from yon Orpheus and his Eurydice?"

"Must be some ragtime," she suggested.

Breen feigned disappointment.

"It all depends upon one's taste, you see," Nielsen interpreted for him.

And Carstairs laughed again.

Erna eyed him. "Why, he's awake," she said.

"Yes," Breen and Nielsen assured her.

Carstairs raised his head and met her glance for an instant, and the sudden warmth he felt brought color to his face. He looked elsewhere, but it was plainly evident that he was feeling better.

"You're sure you're awake now?" she questioned wantonly.

"Yes, thanks," he responded gratefully.

The young men started eating. Erna attended to her remaining duties with them and then went over to another table and sat down. Presently, she was occupied folding paper napkins. Breen, with Nielsen's assistance, opened a discussion on the new-

est fad of French painting, examples of which were being exhibited at a Fifth Avenue gallery.

Carstairs stole cautious glances at Erna. Once or twice, she raised her eyes and caught his glance in hers. Both looked away in embarrassment. This performance was repeated several times. There seemed to be some shy understanding between them.

About a half hour later, the young men arose and put on their hats and coats. Erna came over and gave them their checks. "So long, Erna," Nielsen parted cordially. "*Au midi*," Breen seconded. And the pair made their way up the steps and out of the dining room.

Carstairs had delayed his departure a moment. He approached Erna nervously and in a hurried voice, began: "Is it all right for to-night? You know, you were going to let me know."

She frowned a little and then returned: "Yes—oh no, I can't go out with you to-night."

His face became tragic. She, possessed by one of her soft moods, played the sympathetic: "Will you be off again this week?"

"Yes—Sunday night—from seven to nine," he explained in an eager whisper.

"Well?" She waited, smiling.

"Will it be all right then?" he asked, his courage rising.

"Yes."

"All right—Sunday—seven o'clock," he whispered, hurried out—and forgot his check.

She came after him and caught him at the counter, where he had joined his friends.

"You've forgotten your check," she told him, with a bright glance.

"Oh, yes, thanks," he stammered.

Breen and Nielsen stared at him. The trio passed out into the street.

"Where shall we go?" Breen questioned.

"Let's bum a while in my room," Nielsen proposed.

"I can't," Carstairs declined.

"Why not, John?"

"I want to work a little," Carstairs explained.

Breen and Nielsen stared at him again.

Somewhat later, the painter and the writer were comfortably seated in the latter's comfortable workshop.

"I guess so, but I hope it isn't true," Nielsen was saying.

"Oh, he'll get over it. These attachments of his are never serious nor of long duration. And at best, she's only a hardened little thing, a fact he'll realize in good season."

"John was always much slower to learn matters than the rest of us," Nielsen said dreamily.

"Yes."

"He's foolishly sensitive too."

"And foolishly sentimental," Breen concluded. There was a pause.

"And how about your story?" the painter continued.

"By the way, I'm thinking of using Erna as a model for—"

"Want her to pose for you too, old Sly Fox?" Breen demanded in revenge.

"Of course, and incidentally to find out—"

"I know," Breen interrupted, and the pair laughed in mutual admiration.

In the meanwhile, John Carstairs was busy—working. He was seated at the small upright piano, which monopolized a good part of the space in his small studio. About an hour later, he had finished improvising and selecting and arranging his material and now placed a large sheet of music paper against the piano rack. The staves were blank at present, but it was certain that the young composer intended covering them as rapidly as possible. First of all, however, he wrote the title of the composition at the head of the page: To Thee.

IV

An evening performance was in full swing at the Phoenix Music Hall, a small but well attended five and ten cent moving picture and vaudeville establishment on Eighth Avenue, not far from Landsmann's. At present, the moving pictures were doing a turn, and the auditorium was dark. Music from a piano, placed close to the stage, was the only accompaniment, but it was an adequate one. A young, slender, anaemic individual was seated at the piano.

At the moment, he was playing a dainty popular waltz as a descriptive background for a French comedy scene. Many a laugh rolled toward him. Then he commenced a two-step, as the screen announced a change of pictures. The audience laughed more frequently and with heartier approval, as an American farce romped by. Again, the screen announced a change.

An Irish romance was under way. For this class of sketch, Carstairs was expected to interpolate or to improvise something "sweet and dreamy." Therefore, he took advantage of the opportunity. He leaned closer to the keyboard, lowered his head and

was soon engulfed in what he was rendering—so much so, that he did not turn to keep in touch with the pictures, as was his habit. The yearning sentimental composition had made him captive.

Let others talk against Erna, he would still hold fast to his faith in her. Breen was a cynic, and Nielsen too. They flattered themselves that they knew human nature, but they did not, for they were lacking in sympathy. He had been foolish to listen to their prattle concerning Erna. He would not do so in the future. In fact, he ought to drop their acquaintance or to avoid their company, at least. He would do that. Now, he could keep his thought of her, so pure, to himself—his thought of her, who, in spite of her fun-loving and prank-playing nature, was as pure as the purest and whitest of— Yes, he would keep her pure. And Jimmy Allen, well, he had come back, but his influence over her was dead, dead since the day she had shown him the door, as she had confided to him that time. He could trust her. She was strong enough and pure enough to take care of herself.

This was Friday; to-morrow would be Saturday, and then Sunday, a long, long Sunday, would come and have to pass before she would be with him. Of course, he would see her tomorrow morning at breakfast, but he must be careful to avoid the cynics.

Even so, how could he tell her that he had composed this for her, this, the best of his compositions, thanks to the circumstance that she had been its inspiration. Perhaps, it would be better not to tell her; it would be a bigger surprise if he were to play it for her and then offer it to her, as one would a flower or some other symbol.

Would he have the courage to ask her to come to his studio, so that he might play for her? And if he had, suppose she should refuse? But she had accepted an invitation from Breen, and only to pose for him. Surely, she would not refuse him? And if she did not, could he actually amuse and hold her attention by merely playing for her? Why not? She sang a great deal in the store,—it is true, popular music, which he hated—but she had not been educated to anything higher. That did not make her any the less musical; moreover, she would learn in time, at his guidance perhaps, since she possessed so much temperament along with that lovely voice. Therefore, she would not object should he offer to play for her. And he would play as he never had for any one, eventually to lead up to this composition, that belonged so naturally to her. What would she say when he would offer it to her as her own? He must push his courage far enough to ask her to come to his studio.

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Carstairs continued playing and dreaming.

The audience was very still now. At one end of the front row, a young couple were sitting, holding hands. When the lights were up a while ago, one might have recognized them as Erna Vitek and Jimmy Allen. Both were living in the proverbial seventh heaven.

"Ain't it lovely?" she was whispering.

"The two boobs in the love story?"

"Not them so much—but the music!"

"Pretty good."

"Nice an' dreamy, ain't it?"

"Yes — sounds as though the guy was playing for us."

Erna gave him a reproving nudge, and he laughed. They listened and watched in silence. But he grew impatient. "Don't care for the story, do you?"

"Sure! What's the matter with it?"

"Them two boobs gimme a pain."

"Why?"

"I dunno."

"They're true to life?"

"So's my dead gran'mother."

She laughed. "What's wrong with 'em?"

He squeezed her hand as gently as he was able. "Where do we come in?"

"What?"

"Ain't we true to life?"

She pulled her hand away.

"What's the matter?" he demanded.

"Nothin'."

"Gimme your—my hand again!"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Just because."

"Sore?"

"No."

He was silent.

Presently, she commanded: "Jimmy!"

No answer.

"Jimmy!"

Again, no answer.

Her hand slid across his arm and sought his.

"Mad?"

"Mm—no."

"Sure?"

"Yes."

"Then why wouldn't you answer?"

"Just because!" he mimicked her.

She slapped his hand gently, his hand opened and they clasped again. There was a pause.

"Erna," he said in bolder tones.

"Not so loud!" she warned him.

"Well then —Erna," he repeated in very low tones.

"That's better."

"How about it?"

"About what?"

"What I asked you 'fore we came here?"

"I asked you not to repeat that," was her reproach.

"I know, but I can't help it. Don't you like it here?"

"Sure."

"I mean here, side o' me—in the dark?"

"Yes."

"Well—" He hesitated.

"Well?" she mocked him.

"Think o' how swell it'd be—"

"Be careful, Jimmy!"

"I can't help it," he persisted. "Think o' how swell it'd be—"

"Jimmy!" she warned him once more.

"Oh shucks!" he returned aloud, and was silent.

There was a longer pause.

"Jimmy!"

No answer.

"Jimmy!"

Again, no answer.

"Jimmy!"

A third time, no answer.

She pressed his hand and pushed against his shoulder, but he would not respond. Erna gave in.

"I'm sorry—forgive me?"

"Mm—"

"Do you forgive me?"

"Yes."

"You don't say it very loud."

"Well, you jumped on me before for talkin' loud."

"You'd wake the audience," she apologized.

"Well?" he challenged.

"Well what?" she retorted.

"What did you want to say?"

"Nothin'."

"All right!"—and he was silent.

"Ah yes, Jimmy," she resigned.

"Well?"

"You can go on with—with your story, but—but don't go too far."

"All right."

"Promise?"

"Yes."

"Then go ahead."

He revolved matters in his blunt mind, and recommenced: "You remember, I told you 'bout the

—the little furnished flat my manager, Nolan, asked me to move in?”

“Yes?”

“Well, why couldn’t we—just you an’ me—”

“Jimmy!”

“I know, but I can’t help it, Erna. Things is different now. When I asked you that time—well, that’s all over now. You an’ I’s forgotten that. So what’s buried’s buried. An’ times is different now. You’ve got a job, though it’s a punk one. I’ve got a little money an’ more to come, an’ I’ve cut drinkin’. My health’s fine an’ prospects great. After I finish ‘the Kid’ there’ll be Young Walcott—an’ after Walcott, a bunch o’ others—”

“But Jimmy—”

“Don’t butt in!” he begged seriously. “Now, I know you hate that job o’ yours—”

“It ain’t all cheese an’ honey,” she confessed.

“No, an’ it never will be. Now, why can’t you pull up stakes—”

“Jimmy!”

“Don’t butt in!” he begged more seriously. “This is different than last time. I’m a—a respectable man now an’ you’re a respectable woman.”

“Always have been,” she cautioned him.

“I know,” he hastened to admit. “What I’ve been tryin’ to say is: Keep your job a little longer

if you want to, till I go on with mine an' get lots o' dough. In the meanwhile—" He stopped.

"Well?" she ventured, but with an ominous inflection.

"I'll rent the little flat off Nolan, an' you an' I can—"

"Jimmy!"

"But I'm askin' you to *marry* me this time," he protested.

"I know."

"Ain't that different?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because it ain't."

"Why not?"

"Because it ain't."

"But Erna—"

"Now listen, Jimmy! You promised not to go too far."

"Oh shucks!" he broke out.

They were silent. He let go her hand and drew away a short distance. She removed her hand rather reluctantly. Once or twice, she pushed against his shoulder. But he would not respond.

The romantic pictures disappeared, and the music ceased. The lights were turned on. There was a sigh throughout the audience. Erna and Jimmy

seemed glad of the change as well. A little sooner, they would have been sorry.

She glanced his way. He was not looking in her direction. She nudged him. He still refused to turn his head. "Jimmy," she whispered tenderly.

He stole a half glance at her. She was smiling in invitation. He could not help smiling too.

"You all right now?" she ventured.

He turned toward her, and instantly, his ever-ready laugh dispelled their gloom.

"You all right?" she repeated.

"Yes," he admitted, and declared: "Some scrap that!"

"No, it wasn't," she reassured him and smiled with revived mischief.

Their hands fell back to their natural occupation.

"Turn out the lights!" Jimmy commanded in so loud a tone that most of their neighbors, as well as Erna, giggled.

A German comedian made his appearance and offered the usual monologue. No musical accompaniment was required for this act; therefore, Carstairs had disappeared under the stage. He had not seen Erna and Jimmy, nor they him.

V

Carstairs was waiting at the street corner rendezvous early the following Sunday evening. Impatience had kept him company all day, a long day, but the impatience he felt now was even keener. He had been ahead of their appointment by about twenty minutes, for he was afraid that Erna might be there first. His vigil was that much the longer and more trying. What hours it took for minutes to pass! Suppose she did not come?

The fates, however, were good-humored. He could see an athletic figure coming along at a familiar leisurely pace. It was Erna. His joy and excitement were such that he could scarcely wait for her to reach him. What made her walk so slowly?

"Hello," was her soft cheery greeting.

He had avoided the bakery restaurant all day. He could hardly return her salutation, the last of his courage having fled.

"Where—where shall we go?" he questioned.

"Anywhere," she agreed genially.

Now was his opportunity. He must ask her. Of course, they could not walk the streets the whole of

his two hours' freedom. Nor could they go to the theatre so early. Would she sense these arguments? Moreover, they had been to a restaurant for a little refreshment and conversation on their two former outings. She had not enjoyed those visits particularly, reminding her, as they must have, of her daily life at Landsmann's.

"It's a little bit too cold," he ventured.

"Not so very," she returned mischievously, as they started walking.

He was frightened. "But—"

She was enjoying his embarrassment, but came to his assistance with: "Well, where *shall* we go? It's up to you. You did the invitin'."

"I've got nearly two hours," he explained. "Can you stay out that long?"

"I'm off for the rest o' the night," she assured him; "but I ought to be back under the quilt by ten. I'm a bit tired."

"Of course, you are," he agreed hurriedly—this was another opportunity—"so we mustn't do any walking. Do you—would you like to come—"

"Yes."

"How would you like to come over to my place?"

It was out. What would she say?

"Will anybody else be there?"

"Oh no!"

"It's over there on Fourteenth Street somewhere, ain't it?"

"Yes."

"I don't mind," she said.

Joy and excitement overwhelmed him. He could not speak. And he had imagined all along that it would be so difficult to induce her to come. He did not know what to say.

"Do we cross here?" she suggested.

"Yes," he said in a low tone.

The need of politeness forced itself upon him. Timidly, he took her arm and led her across the street. As a matter of fact, it was she, who was so much stronger and more daring than he, who had done the leading. They reached the opposite side, and walked along in silence. After a minute or so, they approached an old building.

"Here it is," he declared nervously and let go her arm.

They climbed three smelly flights of stairs, followed a dark hallway and came to a halt. He took out his keys and opened a door. "Step in," he requested.

"You've got the light lit," she announced.

"Yes, I thought it'd be—"

"It's awful nice here."

"Do you think so?" he questioned eagerly, greatly

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encouraged. "But it's such a small, dingy place."

"Oh no," she maintained. "It's nice an' cosy."

Erna walked about, examining articles with her inquisitive eyes. "So this is your piano?"

"Yes, it's an old box."

"No, it's nice lookin'. An' whose picture is that?"

"My mother's."

"An' that one?"

"Oh that—that's only—"

"An old *friend*?" she assisted him.

"Yes," he agreed, and his blushes appeared.

Fortunately, Erna's back was turned. But she knew he was blushing, and her face lighted with pleasure. She examined other articles.

Carstairs asked quickly: "Won't you take off your things?"

Slowly, she removed her coat and hat, and fixed her hair at a small looking glass. "Men use these things too," she observed.

"Yes, we do," he echoed, and put her things on the couch, where he likewise laid his own.

"Sit down," he advised.

"Over here?"

"Yes."

"Oh, this is a nice soft chair."

Carstairs walked about a while. He was so

nervous that he did not know what to do. Nevertheless, he realized that he must offer to entertain her. At least, he must say something.

But Erna spoke first. "What makes you walk around?"

"Oh nothing," he returned abruptly, looked about in confusion and finally selected the piano stool, which, however, was so close to Erna's chair that his confusion grew. The girl, herself, had betrayed a little embarrassment once or twice, but she had conquered its last sign. This was perhaps possible because of her enjoyment of Carstairs' rather pathetic condition. Erna loved and craved praise or flattery, and the young composer's substitute for them was certainly a decided tribute.

"It's awful nice here," she repeated.

"I'm glad you think so," he responded gratefully, and glanced toward her, only to look away.

"It's kind o' restful too."

This was an excellent opening.

"You must be very tired," he declared.

"A little bit."

"You've been working all day?"

"Since six-thirty this morning."

"Lord, then you must be tired."

"Not so very much," she denied with pride. "I can stand work."

He dared a glance at her strong body and her bold eyes. How splendid she was!

"But *you* must be tired," she continued.

"Yes,—no, only a very little."

"You've been workin' all day too."

"At the afternoon performance. I didn't get away until six o'clock.

"An' you go on to-night?"

"From nine to eleven, yes," he explained, and felt ashamed that he was so weary. And she had been working in that stuffy, unhealthy dining room and kitchen since half-past six and was as cheerful as ever.

"You'll be needin' a rest now," she went on.

"Oh no!" he hastily assured her.

"Then will you play for me? I never heard you play, an' I've heard Mr. Breen an' Mr. Nielsen talk so much about you."

"They are flatterers," he said, with a self-conscious laugh. "But if you'd like—if you—would you really like to have me?"

"Of course."

This was his next opportunity, but again, his courage would not assist him. What should he play? "Do you really feel like listening?" he began once more.

"Of course—I like music," she argued.

There was nothing else to do. He had better start playing. And Carstairs turned on the stool. "What shall I play for you?"

"Anything at all."

"But wouldn't you rather—"

"Play somethin' you like yourself," she interrupted.

Carstairs hesitated. He had not had the faintest idea how difficult it would be. Moreover, he could feel her soft brown eyes resting on him. And he had been vowing such wonderful deeds of late: that he would play for her as he never had for any one—that he would play her composition, which belonged so naturally to her. Instead, he could scarcely touch a key.

A spirit of self-condemnation took possession of him. He must forget himself. She would think him a fool. Besides, she might learn how much he—No, she must not learn that. He commenced improvising.

The young composer blundered considerably at first, but his self-resentment helped him, and his efforts soon displayed more coherence and warmth. Should he open his program with "To Thee"? Why not? Why wait until later? But she might understand. She might catch its significance and then—But how could she know that he had written the

composition? It might just as easily belong to some other composer. Yes, he would play it.

"Are you ready?" he asked with attempted levity.

"Of course, don't stop!" she encouraged him.

Carstairs played "To Thee", at first, with timidity and uncertainty, but by and by with more resolution and consequent expressiveness as his faith in the composition, as an expression of himself, returned. Gradually, too, he realized how appropriate was the mood that flowed through its measures.

Erna watched him. A greedy little smile played about the corners of her mouth and her nose twitched slightly. But the corners straightened and her nose stopped twitching.

No, he was too soft. His shoulders were so weak and his hands so small and his face so pale—just like his nature. He belonged to his mother up there and to that soft pretty face over there. But he was a nice, decent fellow. And he was lots of fun, he was so different from other men. But he was sad. She loved joy and freedom. He seemed like a mean little prisoner, and he made her feel soft too. But he had always been decent toward her. Yes, he belonged to such as his mother and the pretty face. Anyhow, he knew how to play the piano . . . What a different time she had had last night! Jimmy was

such a big, strong, happy fellow. But even he did not quite satisfy her. Erna sighed just a little.

She regained immediate control of herself and stopped studying Carstairs. Instead, she followed the patterns in the small rug at her feet. Presently, she gave herself up to the music. It was very pretty. It sounded familiar too.

Carstairs finished playing.

"I like that," she said instantly.

"Do you?" he demanded, wheeling toward her.

"Yes, it's awful nice," she complimented him.

He brightened perceptibly. "Do you really think so? Do you really like it?"

"Of course!"

He could not repress his emotion. "Do you—I—what do you think?" he asked with enthusiasm.

"What?"

"Do you know who wrote that?"

"No."

"I wrote that," he broke out, and leaned forward.

"You did?"

"Yes!"

"It's awful nice," she repeated.

This was not very strong applause, but it was more than sufficient for Carstairs, and he grew reckless. In one moment, he had confessed himself the

author of the work, and in the next, such was his present rashness, he was about to go much farther.

"How would you like—" but he stopped, and smiled in a happy way.

"What?" she urged him.

"You're sure you like it?" he repeated.

"Yes."

"Would you like to have it?" he asked with sudden boldness.

"What do you mean?"

"Don't you understand?" he rambled on, and explained: "Composers, you know, write songs and piano pieces and orchestral works, and afterward they often dedicate them to somebody—to one of their friends or—or one of their relatives. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"That's what I want to do," he continued excitedly. "I wrote the piece—it's nothing wonderful, but I—I put myself into it and—and you like it—"

"Yes."

"So I'd like to give it to you."

"But I don't play," she protested.

"That isn't the point," he declared. "I'm dedicating it to you—that is, your name appears on it: first, the name of the composition, then my name, as

composer, and then 'to Miss Erna Vitek.' Do you see?"

"Oh yes!"

"Do you like the idea?"

"Yes, that's fine."

"Great!" he cried.

"But what's the name o' the piece?" she requested quietly.

"Why, I—I gave it a name—but suppose I call it simply: 'A Song'?"

"Yes."

"Sure! That'd be a nice title, wouldn't it?"

"Yes."

His emotions threatened to run over. He wanted to tell her the rest: that, as a matter of fact, she had been the one to inspire the composition—his inspiration—but, well, that would be going too far. She would be learning too much. But this was the happiest day of his life. He had made a long stride, even over the evening when, for a few confidential minutes, she had confided to him those details of her past relation with Allen. He must compose many compositions for her.

Carstairs played other music, composition after composition, many of them his own, but all the while he waited to hear Erna ask him to repeat her composition. She did not do so at once, but eventually,

bored—to tell the truth—by the incessant flow of music, she made the request. Overjoyed, he repeated the work, and every measure lingered, breathed and swayed with the mood of its creator. Near the close, Erna succeeded in stifling a yawn.

It was after nine o'clock when Carstairs conducted her down the three flights. He would receive a reprimand and fine when he reported at the music hall. But what did he care?

The young composer did not return to his sanctum until eleven thirty. He quickly lit the gas. At the theatre, a thought had come to torment him, as he had rehearsed the evening's doings and joys many times over. He went to the piano and took down the picture of the girl. Presently, he buried it under a heap of odds and ends that littered the drawer of a bureau, and said to himself for at least the fiftieth time: "What a careless damned fool I am!"

VI

It was early the next afternoon. Breen and Nielsen were arguing in the former's studio: a large unusually well furnished and attractively decorated West Fourteenth Street skylight room.

"Now, you clear out of here!" Breen was commanding. "She'll be here right away."

"Sure she won't disappoint thee?" Nielsen mocked pleasantly.

"No, I saw her this morning and this noon for a moment, and she intends keeping her royal promise."

"How about the rouge garment?"

"She hasn't had time to alter it."

"That won't make any difference, of course," Nielsen ventured in provoking tones.

"Go on! Clear out of here!" Breen repeated.

"You painters!" sang Nielsen, as he backed toward the door.

"We're no worse than you fellows are," Breen retorted. "Besides, this afternoon is no more and no less than an experiment in line with the contract of our triumvirate. Your inning will come, especially as *you* are writing a story, for which purpose—"

"I know," Nielsen admitted with cheerful slyness. "And I really need Erna to help me with it."

"And Carstairs will have to contribute his share of the contract, unless he persists in that 'count me out' air of his."

"Oh, he'll come around, in his own way," was Nielsen's confident assurance. "I saw him this morning, by the way—the first time I've seen him at Landsmann's in several days."

"How is he?"

"Unusually cheery and affable."

"He'll recover from that foolishness."

"I think so too, but—"

"Now, get out!" Breen commanded a third time. "You'll be gossiping here forever."

Nielsen took hold of the door knob, smiled in an aggravating manner, opened the door, bowed low and said in a droll tone: "Moral or unmoral, but—?"

Breen followed him, but Nielsen escaped, and the painter slammed the door. His mood changed instantly. He bustled around the studio, fixing this and rearranging that object and eventually looked about with satisfaction. He then approached a looking glass, readjusted his tie, smoothed his hair with his hand and otherwise subjected himself to a critical but self-satisfied examination, which, however, was

cut short by a knock at the door. He hurried over to the door and opened it. "Come in!" he said cordially and stepped aside for Erna.

She was wearing her best clothes, which were very attractive on her. Unfortunately, the only red in the picture was a profusion of ribbons on her black hat and a neat tie—but fortunately, her red cheeks and lips were not missing. Altogether, Erna was a seductive apparition.

Certainly, this was Breen's opinion too. "How charming you look, your Ladyship!" he exclaimed.

"Do I?" she retorted, smiling.

"Oh decidedly, decidedly," and Breen bowed in anticipation of a pleasant afternoon. Bringing all of his courtesy to the surface, he helped Erna to remove her coat. She went over to the looking glass, laughed, cried: "You've got a glass too," and took off her hat with careless ease.

"What do you mean?" demanded Breen, standing behind her and surveying her reflection with open admiration.

"Nothin'," she returned rather impudently.

"A lovely girl that!" he added significantly.

"Think so?" she challenged.

"Decidedly," he repeated.

She shrugged her shoulders a little and smiled at him in the glass. Breen's interest grew. He tried

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to put his hands on her shoulders, by way of confidence, but Erna turned toward him with a quick supple movement. Like the accomplished artist she was, she said nothing, not even by way of reproach, but laughed again. He eyed her with still franker admiration.

"Well?" she questioned.

"Oh, I know," he said, recollecting his rôle, and went on evasively: "But you're not wearing your red dress or very much red?"

"What difference does that make? Maybe you'd rather have me come some other time?"

"No, no! You stay right here, now that you've come. You'll do just as well in that costume. The same Erna Vitek is inside it. But—er—"

"But what?"

"I won't attempt a color sketch of you in that dress. There, there, forgive me—it's very charming, my dear, but— Perhaps, I'll just make a pencil sketch of you to-day. Artists ought to commence with pencil sketches anyhow, until the characters of their subjects have had time to properly enter their blood, so to speak. Which, of course, is all Greek to you. Do you object, madame?"

"No, do me any way you like," she consented.

"Oh, if you feel that way about it," he hinted audaciously.

"Take care!" she warned.

Breen went over to the model throne and pretended to place the chair for her. He was sorry that he had had to suggest even a pencil sketch of her, but he was forced to attempt some part of their original agreement. What is more, he had practically cast away all thought of "studying" Erna, later to make his report before the triumvirate. She was too interesting and magnetic an individual to be used for such a childish purpose. "Come over here and sit down," he requested calmly.

Giving herself an unexpected air of modesty, she complied, at the same time adding a prudish touch by fixing her skirt carefully as she sat down. Breen was puzzled, but drew up a chair, took a pencil and sketch book and seated himself. "I'm going to draw you at close range," he apologized. She smiled in encouragement.

Breen commenced drawing, very carelessly, it is true. Erna watched him with innocent eyes. "Do I pose right?" she asked at length.

"Yes," he assured her.

She was silent.

A little later, she asked: "Do your models have to keep quiet?"

"Not at all! Chatter away!"

But she preferred to remain silent. To tell the

truth, this was not Erna's first experience as a sitter. She had posed for two or three other artists in the past: once as Carmen, another time as a madonna, and a third time for some allegorical effort concerning Spring. Breen continued to study her for the drawing. His mind, however, or that region wherein its desires lay, was more busy than his pencil. Ten minutes or so later, he stopped drawing and held the pad off, squinted one eye at Erna, then at the drawing and again at Erna.

"Do you like being winked at?" he asked.

"Depends upon who's doin' it," she commented.

"Don't you like me to do it?"

"I don't know," she replied enigmatically.

He got up from his chair and approached her.

"Bring the picture with you!" she requested.

Breen, however, once more tried to put his hands on her. She pushed back her chair, and in outraged tones commanded: "Mr. Breen!"

"I beg your pardon," he said with well assumed candor, but he was irritated to a considerable degree. "I merely wanted to change your pose a bit."

"Well, why didn't you ask *me* to do it?" she complained, her innocent self again.

He returned to his chair without explaining.

"Am I all right now?" she asked.

"Pull your chair forward again."

"So?"

"That'll do."

Erna watched him as before, and Breen went on drawing. But his usually well balanced mind was ruffled. He tried to construct some other scheme. Erna had always been quite prone (after all, she was only a waitress) to permit occasional familiarity on his part at Landsmann's. What made her play the prude away from home? Perhaps she was, at heart, like the rest of her class, nothing more than a narrow moralistic thing, and not the unmoral soul he had constantly given her credit for being. His disgust was supreme. On the contrary, he mused, she might only be playing a part. Admitting that Erna, in society, only held the position of waitress, still, she was a very shrewd girl. He must try some other attack, allowing her the credit she deserved. He had attempted flattery, pleasantry and not a little boldness. What should be his next step?

Eventually, the young artist tried bribery. Having finished his work, he presented it to Erna accompanied by a short but eloquently complimentary speech. The girl did not neglect to admire the drawing and to thank him for the present. His act, apparently, made no stronger impression on her. Later, he suggested and, with her consent, prepared and served some tea and biscuits. They were sitting

at a small cosy table. About them, the atmosphere had spread a halo of warmth and intimacy. And Breen played host and admirer to the best of his accomplished ability. But Erna refused to respond any more than she had done earlier. She appeared grateful; she talked a good deal; and she seemed completely at ease with Breen and her surroundings. But she would not respond more than she had done. Breen's disgust threatened to reach a climax.

There was a reason for Erna's conduct. She, in her greed of heart, playing with Breen, as she had with Carstairs, the part of a watchful cat, had come to several conclusions. She disliked the artist's long, angular figure, his sharp, shrewd face, and most of all, his cold, self-sympathetic eyes. And she disliked him personally even more. Without claiming any undue powers of discernment for Erna, one would surely have had to credit her with the possession of a strong feminine instinct. Her instinct had resented his attentions, for, behind them all, she had felt that he, as a gentleman, was shoving her down where she belonged. She was a waitress, but she was good looking enough and lots of fun for him—and much more in prospect. In a word, Breen had brought out the hard calculating side of her nature, and she had raised her guard against him.

Furthermore, Erna was in a bad humor when she

came to Breen's studio, her genial conduct notwithstanding. She had seen Jimmy that noon in the dining room, but he had spent all of his time talking fight with the customers. As though the fact that he was to turn to the ring to-morrow night would bring the world to an end! She would pay him for neglecting her. Besides, Mr. Nielsen had been approaching her. He had been asking her to "pose" for him too. Did he also want to take advantage of her? Still, there was something human inside of him. He had always acted a little differently from the others. As for Jimmy—

Breen interrupted her reflection. He reached across the table and tried to touch her hand. Erna's face flushed with anger, and her hand came down upon his with a loud slap. Just as quickly, she recollected herself. "Excuse me!" she asked sullenly.

Breen, however, was through. He arose from his chair. This had been impudence beyond all impudence. And the man of success turned his back upon the waitress.

Erna likewise got up, leaving the sketch on the table. She did not offer a second apology. Instead, she drew on her coat, picked up her hat and walked over to the glass. Her face was crimson.

Breen was quite sorry. He came behind Erna and made several attempts to clear some momentary

pangs of conscience. But Erna would not listen. He moved away, pride clouding his face.

Erna hurried toward the door. Breen followed her, offering one or two final excuses. But she refused to answer, and went out. Breen slammed the door behind her. Presently, he was busy pacing the studio in a vain endeavor to regain some of his composure.

Steps were to be heard coming along the hallway. The door was opened cautiously, and Nielsen's head and shoulders appeared. And his caressing voice questioned: "Well, your Highness, what is your decision? Moral, unmoral or—?"

Breen faced about, swore a strong oath and commanded: "Get out of here!"

"But, dear Bainbridge—"

"Get out, you spy!" Breen continued angrily, and went toward the door.

"But I want to know your decision."

"Moral, moral, a million times moral—she has degenerated—in fact, she hasn't even degenerated. I wouldn't do her the honor of saying so. She's always been a narrow, conventional, contemptible little thing. Is that enough, you ass? She's a—"

"Enough, noble Sire!" Nielsen interrupted with a mysterious air. "Thou hast spoken. Enough!"

Luckily, his head and shoulders disappeared just in time.

Breen slammed the door.

VII

Wednesday morning was a particularly noisy morning in the rear dining room of Landsmann's. Jimmy Allen was the hero. On the night before, he had knocked out his opponent toward the close of the first round. Some of his admirers had met at Landsmann's to discuss and celebrate the event, and one who had been present was supplying the others with the details.

"An' toward the end o' the round," he was describing, "Jimmy ducked under the poor 'Kid's' flabby guard an' caught 'im an awful soak in the guts, an' as 'the Kid' doubled up, Jimmy swung the finisher — it was a terror! — right on the point o' the jaw. 'The Kid' hit the mat deader than a door nail. An' they carried 'im away, a smashed hope inside o' three minutes."

The listeners clamored for more, and one of them queried: "But I thought 'the Kid' was such a clever sidestepper?"

"He is, but he couldn't sidestep Jimmy. Jimmy's a terror in the ring. He's a good-natured feller outside, but the sight of another feller in front of 'im kind o' riles 'is blood. He can't rest till he's bat-

tered the guy away, an' let 'im see a little blood, like 'the Kid's' mouth bleedin', an' it's all off 'cept the count, for Jimmy goes wild. He got to 'the Kid' by constant borein' in. Half a dozen fierce body taps weakened the poor guy, then a couple o' face smashers, an' then the finish. Oh, it was awful."

The listeners sighed with awe. "An' Jimmy?" requested the interlocutor.

"Oh, he got a scratch or two. But he was 'is smilin' self soon's it was over."

Standing near the doorway, listening to every word with feverish interest, was Erna. Her eyes shone, and her heart beat with joyous pride.

Landsmann suddenly called to her from the kitchen: "Erna, your order is here." She did not heed him, but waited for more details. Again, the storekeeper called to her, but once more, she refused to heed him. The man appeared in the doorway, his face red with vexation. "Erna! Do you hear me?"

"Yes, yes," she retorted petulantly, and hurried past him. He followed close behind her, and as she turned, gave her a stupid but indignant stare. Erna returned his stare with interest, and Landsmann, beaten as he had been so often, retreated to the store, there to seek muttered consultation with his wife.

Erna was about to take up her order, when she

came upon a remarkable sight. She stopped, stared and, stimulated by a desire to emulate, tiptoed forward, her strong white teeth showing in the joy of anticipation. On the bottom of the kitchen sink, a goodly sized rat was drinking.

The girl continued to sneak forward without making a sound. Suddenly, her hand darted out and seized the rat by the neck; at the same time, she turned on the water from the large faucet. With a strong grip, she held the squirming, squeaking animal under the stream.

Gretchen screamed and ran out into the store. "*Was ist los?*" demanded the storekeeper. Gretchen told her story in a frightened whisper. Mrs. Landsmann and Molly screamed; several customers arose and, led by Landsmann, who waddled forward, came into the kitchen. Landsmann stopped short at a respectful distance from Erna, eyed her furiously and shouted imprecations. She paid no attention to him, but continued her pleasant task, her face alight with animal joy and brutality. The rat's life was soon extinguished, due, perhaps, more to Erna's fingers than the water. Proudly holding it out by the tail for display, she dropped the body into a pail under the sink.

The storekeeper approached her, followed by the customers. The latter proffered congratulations,

but not so Herr Landsmann. He grabbed some table refuse and dumping it into the pail, piled some old newspapers on top, all the while averting his face as much as possible. He then turned upon Erna, but she stood her ground, defying him, and the storekeeper was forced to resort to still stronger imprecation. Erna grew impudent in the knowledge of her righteousness, and Landsmann had to retreat once more, but this time with threatening gestures and for an even angrier consultation with his wife. The other waitresses refused to return to the kitchen, but went over to assist Landsmann.

The customers, who had been joined by others from the rear dining room, refused to leave the kitchen, each one wishing to pay Erna homage by compliment or by taking her arm. Jimmy Allen was forgotten. At first, the girl, conscious of the sensation she had created so accidentally,—killing rats was not entirely new to her—faced her worshippers with an exultant smile. Soon, she tired of their praise, and more so of their physical attentions, a repetition of their usual conduct toward her. Furthermore, the storekeeper's attitude rankled deeper and deeper, until anger controlled her. Therefore, she pushed her way through the gathering, ordered all back to their tables, a command they obeyed un-

der protest, and returned to her duties with a decidedly willful air. If only Jimmy were here!

Within the next hour or so, Herr Landsmann, backed by his wife's moral support, came into the kitchen four times to reprimand Erna. He had even hunted for other pretexts to scold her. By nine o'clock, when Erna was almost alone in her small empire, her resentment had reached a state of revolt. Why didn't he bounce her at once? It would be better. In fact, she would leave of her own free will. That would be better still. She would be free. She had a right to be happy. She had always been happy. So she would be free, Landsmann, his wife and the rest of the world notwithstanding. How she hated and despised them! Let any one else try to tie her hands!

Another half hour passed, and Erna's determination grew. Her whole fighting instinct had been set astir. As a result, she had treated the few remaining customers with contemptuous neglect. They were all of one breed. And they left, one by one, passing remarks, laughing or trying to banter her. Soon she was left to herself and surly reflection, as Landsmann, luckily, had discontinued molesting her—for the present, at least. However, a newcomer entered the dining room. But he was the highly welcome Jimmy Allen.

Erna greeted him with joy. She had forgotten her yesterday's resentment, in his sudden rise to honor and in her present need. And Jimmy greeted her with joy. No other word passed between them. Instead, Jimmy embraced her with all of his brute strength. He then tried kissing her, only to have Erna slip from his grasp. Jimmy's blood was aroused. He pursued Erna, cornered her and caught her with an even stronger embrace than before, breathing hard with passion. They overturned a chair, and Jimmy tripped and lost his hold. They both breathed rapidly, and stood apart, watching each other. Herr Landsmann looked into the dining room, scowled and disappeared.

Jimmy again came closer, but Erna shook her head in warning. She had seen the storekeeper. Presently, she gave her lover a short nervous account of her morning's trial. Jimmy swore a generous oath and begged her to drop her work at once. But Erna hesitated.

"Ah, come out o' this!" he pleaded.

Erna would not answer.

"Come out o' this, Erna!" he repeated seriously. "You're sick o' this. I'm sick o' this. Let's go away. We're fixed now—or as good as fixed. The only job's the minister's. Come on, Erna!"

Still, the girl refused to answer, but it was evident

that she was weakening—as Jimmy was aware too. Hurriedly, he recounted his victory of last night, emphasized the fact that he was stronger than ever, knew “more about the game,” and outlined the near future: that he was soon to meet Young Walcott, whom he would dispose of, and some unknown from Chicago. He would have quite a little money shortly, and he could support her “as a decent woman should be supported.” She would be happy. They would both be happy. “Come on, Erna!” he concluded. “Be a sport!”

Erna was in a groggy state. One last stinging argument would have finished her. She hesitated, as did Jimmy, who, unfortunately, resorted to stalling.

At length, she said: “Gimme until to-night!”

Now, Jimmy missed entirely: “But I say, Erna. I got an important date then.”

Her resentment returned at once. She recalled his neglect of yesterday. “What?” she demanded jealously.

“I got to see Nolan an’ Walcott an’ his manager to-night. We got to talk over an’ arrange things. Besides, Nolan’s givin’ a little spread in my honor among the boys. Can’t you tell me now? Tell me now!”

“I said *to-night*, didn’t I?” she retorted in dangerous tones.

"I know, Erna, but I can't see you to-night. Make it to-morrow night, an' we'll talk it over, long's you won't say now. Make it to-morrow night! An' I'll spend the whole evenin' with you."

Erna had turned her back on him. Jimmy came closer, but she walked away, while he followed her, foolishly continuing to apologize and to cajole her. Unhappily, Jimmy's suit was interrupted. Another man came into the dining room: Eric Nielsen.

Glances passed between them. Nielsen went over to the farthest corner, took off his hat and coat and sat down. Jimmy looked at Erna on the sly, but she paid no attention to him. The young fighter did not stay for breakfast. He left the room without another word. And Erna smiled secretly.

Nielsen, always a lover of other's secrets, had digested most of the scene. But he was still a diplomat. Consequently, he said nothing and permitted Erna to come over for his order. She looked nervous and uncertain.

"What's new?" he asked pleasantly.

"Nothin'."

"Still ham and eggs and the old program?"

She smiled slightly. "Yes!"

He ordered some eggs, toast and a cup of black coffee and explained: "I need some energy for work this morning. I feel dopy."

Erna smiled again and went away. She was feeling a little better. There was always something soothing in Nielsen and his banter. And she did not wait in the kitchen for his order, but came back to his table. Erna rarely acted parts in Nielsen's company.

He looked up sympathetically. He wanted to ask her what was wrong, but knowing her antipathy for expressed sympathy or soft advances, remained silent. Herr Landsmann looked in upon them. Erna flushed with her old resentment, and the storekeeper frowned and disappeared. Nielsen remarked the exchange. "That's it, is it?" he observed gently.

"What?"

"The boss?"

She was thoughtful and then admitted: "Yes."

"What's the Dutchman done?"

Slowly, and not without reluctance in the beginning, she told him the details, he interrupting her once or twice with encouragement. "Shades of Norway!" he exclaimed in admiration. "You could easily play the Rat-wife in 'Little Eyolf'."

She looked at him in a puzzled way, but he laughed and advised her: "Don't mind me; I'm cracked. Go on!"

Erna related the rest of the incident. He was quietly attentive to every detail, and at the conclu-

sion of her recital, broke out cheerfully: "The trouble with the German is that he's too slow to catch even a cockroach. Therefore, he resents speed. So Landsmann calls you down. And the girls—well, they're children, like most females. You're entirely too dramatic for their comfort."

Erna never quite understood Nielsen, but she melted down to some of her old good nature. Nielsen continued his reassuring nonsense, and gradually, the rest of her good nature was restored. The young writer was not slow to notice the change, and he was glad to have been of service to her. He had no desire to make any personal use of Erna's present mental condition, but nevertheless, he proceeded: "Erna, you must be tired."

"Yes?"

"Certainly. You need a little rest—a little diversion. Let me help you out; there's a sensible girl. Will you come over and spend part of the evening with me?"

His request had not been a bold one; he had made it seriously, and with no thought of himself. But Erna gave him a sharp look. He met her glance with an honest one and pursued: "I don't want you to pose for the story, as I asked you yesterday—honestly, I don't. I just want to amuse you a little,

if I can. You need a bit of a change, even by having me supply it."

This was approaching dangerously close to a soft advance, but Erna did not heed it. She was still busy trying to read Nielsen, but reading Nielsen was not so easy as appearances would have led one to believe. However, she was able to read humanity behind his lurking smile, and likewise his seriousness of purpose. "I don't know," she said in doubt.

"You're not afraid?"

"No," she admitted.

"Come ahead then. We'll have a quiet little evening together, or you can tell me some more about your enemies, German and others. As for posing, I'll do the posing, such as standing on my head, for example."

Erna had always felt that Nielsen was human. It now came as a realization. She gave him a final penetrating glance. He smiled frankly, and she had to smile as well. "All right," she resigned.

"You're a good sport, Erna," he complimented her. "But you're too trusting, I'm afraid."

"Think so?"

"Yes."

She looked somewhat doubtful, and then her face cleared. Nielsen understood.

"Your order's ready, Erna," came Landsmann's voice.

And the girl hurried out.

VIII

Erna was in a splendid mood when she called on Nielsen that evening. In the first place, the young Norwegian-American had earned her gratitude. Secondly, and what is perhaps more important, Jimmy Allen had come into Landmann's both for the noon and the evening meal and had paid her humble devotion. She had agreed to spend to-morrow evening with him, but principally that she might add coal to the fire of his impatience by putting off her answer, which she had not formed as yet but in the existence of which she had succeeded in leading him to believe. Thirdly, she had had two more tilts with Landsmann and was victorious in both. Consequently, Erna was in high spirit. In addition, her greedy nature was looking forward to the new sensation that life might be on the point of offering her in Nielsen.

It was evident at once that he was likewise in the best of humor. His greeting of Erna was of the heartiest cordiality and cheer. And he required only a minute or two to settle her comfortably on the couch and to make her feel otherwise at home. She was not surprised. On the contrary, she entered im-

mediately into the mood of the young writer's hospitality.

"Well, Rat-wife, how've you been?" he commenced. "I haven't seen you since this morning."

"Why do you call me Rat-wife?"

"Because you're a professional rat catcher."

"I've caught rats before," she confessed.

"Have you? Great! I always thought you must have had another vocation in life."

"But I hate caterpillars, don't you?" she declared naïvely.

"By all means," he agreed. "They give one the fuzzy-wuzzies, don't they?"

They both laughed. He drew his chair closer to the couch and watched her frankly. She watched him with equal candor. There was honest admiration in his next remark: "You're strong, aren't you, Erna?"

"Yes."

"How'd you get that way?" he pursued.

"I must 'a' been born that way. I guess my father an' mother were strong an' healthy. Any way, I exercise a great deal—"

"In the store, you mean?"

"No, at night, by the open window, in—"

"Not in the nude?" he ventured.

"Not quite, but almost!" she admitted, and they laughed again.

"But Erna, what made you say you *guess* your father and mother were strong? Don't you know whether they were? Aren't they alive?"

She looked at him suddenly, but his straightforward glance reassured her. She announced quietly: "I never saw my parents."

"What?" he broke out. "Then how—but I beg your pardon, child. I didn't mean to be inquisitive."

"You're not inquisitive," she returned with unaccustomed seriousness. "Only—"

"I understand," he interrupted. "Don't speak of it! It's too painful. Besides, we mustn't be growing gloomy."

Erna was meditative. She had never confided that part of her life to any one. It might be nice to unburden some of it. And Mr. Nielsen—he was so —She glanced at him.

"Please don't!" he requested. "I'd much rather you wouldn't."

She smiled and said: "It isn't so sad; it's just kind o' funny."

"Well, if it's funny, out with it, but if it isn't—"

"It's kind o' funny that I should be tellin' at all."

"To me, you mean?"

"Yes!"

"That's easy. You trust me; that's the reason," he explained jocularly.

"Do I? How do you know?"

"Oh, I'm a wise old know-it-all. Which is certainly a nice bunch of conceit, isn't it?"

"No," she denied good-humoredly.

Without pretense of any sort, and completely at her ease sitting there on the couch only a yard or two from him, she gave Nielsen a few points in her knowledge of past years. Briefly, she laid claim to having lived nearly all her life with adopted parents, from whom, thanks to their continued selfishness and maltreatment, she had run away about a year ago. These people had once informed her that her father had married some woman of position in Bohemia, where Erna was born, and that, having squandered her money, he had disappeared for good. Her mother had died in giving birth to her, and her adopted parents, related to him as cousins, had received her indirectly through some friends of her father's, as well as money, through various mysterious channels, up to her sixth year. The remittances stopped suddenly, and she was left a beggar on their hands, a fact of which they were often careful to remind her. At the age of twelve or thirteen, Erna had hunted for and found a situation, and later others, and had been able to pay some sort of board

through the intervening years. But her "parents," who had five children of their own, despised her and maltreated her accordingly, as did the children, guided by the elders' precepts. Only her strength of body and endowed pugnaciousness had saved her from greater maltreatment.

"And this you call a funny story?" demanded Nielsen, stopping her.

"There's nothing so very sad in it," she declared stubbornly.

"There isn't?"

"No."

His admiration for her developed. Erna certainly possessed sterling qualities.

"But I haven't finished," she interposed.

"Never mind, Erna. I've heard enough."

"You haven't heard why I quit my 'parents'."

"I don't have to," he tried to stop her.

"There's only a little to it."

"Well?"

"They tried to sell me."

"What?"

"Just what I said."

"What do you mean?"

"They tried to sell me to an old admirer o' mine in Paterson."

"You must be crazy, child."

"No more'n you," she insisted. "The man was all ready with his money an'—"

"But this is impossible," he interrupted.

"No, it isn't. I ought to know. It made me jump the track."

"That's how you ran away?"

"Yes."

"A year ago?"

"Yes. It was the last straw. They'd tried the same game twice before. I was through."

Nielsen eyed her in sympathy. He had not credited the whole of her story, incoherent and almost imaginary as some of its details sounded, but the climax had moved him deeply. He was not as superficial as his outward demeanor might indicate. But he was still a diplomat, and knowing Erna's nature better than ever now, did not offer her open sympathy. Instead, he questioned: "So you wandered around New York looking for jobs?"

"Yes."

"Till you landed at Landsmann's?"

"Oh no, I had two other jobs before that."

"Where?"

"At other bakeries, but I was fired."

"For—for sassing back?" he asked, smiling.

"Yes, just as I sass old Landsmann."

He grew serious. "Hadn't you better be careful?"

"How?"

"About angering Landsmann?"

"I can't help it. I hate him. I hate Germans. My 'parents' were German an'—"

"He may fire you too."

"I don't care."

"But you don't want to be forced to run about New York again, do you?"

Erna was about to break out, thinking of Jimmy, "I won't have to," but substituted staring at Nielsen. He was so fine, so human, so—

"Never mind, Erna! Let's talk of something more cheerful." Suddenly, it was his turn to look thoughtful. Before he was aware of himself, he commenced: "Erna!"

"Yes?"

"If you ever need anybody—"

"Yes?"

"I mean in case you should ever lose your job—"

"Yes?"

"Don't hesitate to come to me for help."

He had spoken in a more earnest tone than was his custom. Erna looked quantities of gratitude. "Do you mean—"

"Yes," he forestalled her. "I'm a man, Erna, or

a part o' one. I know you're a good sport, I've seen so much evidence of it. In fact, you're as good and probably a better sport than I am"—all this with a return to banter—"so it's up to me, if you ever need assistance."

Erna was unable to reply.

"Will you?" he requested more quietly.

"Yes," she agreed, and was silent.

Presently, he came back to the whimsical. "We're a funeral party, aren't we?"

"No."

"Well, we can start a partnership as funeral directors to bury the past, can't we?"

"Sure!"

Nielsen laughed, and she followed his example.

"Erna, I envy you," he started again.

"Why?"

"Nothing downs you long. You're such a happy Indian that you're able to run your world."

"Am I?"

"Yes. It takes happy people to run the world, you know."

"Does it?"

"Certainly. That's my humble belief anyhow. Dost believe in philosophy?"

"No time for it!" she returned.

"You're right," he applauded. "It's only a

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pastime for lemon natures. Stick to your joy, Erna!"

Erna was indulging in more abstract matters than she had ever attempted, for she said: "I can't help it, I suppose. I love joy and happy people. An' fresh air, strength, freedom." But it was Nielsen's fault, he used such a subtle method of probing her.

"That'll do, Erna," he interrupted. "You have spoken. There is nothing to be added to fresh air, the breeder of strength, the breeder of freedom. This ought to be enough philosophy for one day, eh? We'll have headaches soon, won't we?"

"Not me!" she denied, and he laughed and added: "Then I'll close the sermon with a little text, if I may."

"Go ahead."

"Whatever happens," he bantered her; "stick to your freedom with your last dying breath!"

"Thanks!"

The evening developed even further intimacy. And Erna soon came to realize that she had discovered her new sensation. As for Nielsen, he was spending an unusual evening too. Several times, he thought of Jimmy Allen and his connection with Erna. He was a splendid joyous animal like her. It did not surprise him that he had been restored to her favor, they were so well mated. And he re-

called the short but significant scene he had spoiled that morning.

Erna, surely, was a rare nature,—hard, perhaps, selfish and cruel in many ways too, quite a little more so than others, but her strength of will, self reliance and her stubborn pursuit of pleasure and excitement—her life of joy—were irresistible. And she was only a waitress. But she was far more than that, an individual, as Carstairs had vaunted that time; she had lived a life harder to endure than that loaded upon his educated acquaintances, for example, and yet, she, lacking their knowledge and so called experience and wisdom, controlled life; life did not control her. And Nielsen, who seldom overlooked dissecting himself along with others, admitted readily that Erna attracted him powerfully, and not in the name of the story, which he had forgotten—for the present, anyhow.

Erna's mind was making more rapid calculations than ever before. "Stick to your freedom!" he had advised her. It was true. She must go on fighting for that. But what of Jimmy—and marriage? Marriage, that word with a bad taste, marriage even with Jimmy would steal a good portion of her freedom. She must be careful. Besides, her power over Jimmy was so easy just the same. And Nielsen, that puzzling human man, disconcerted her. He

was different from Jimmy. He was strong physically too, if not quite as handsome, and he possessed a strong heart and mind, which Jimmy did not. But his constant joking—was he really serious? She never knew just where to find him, he eluded her so. If she were to marry, she would never see him again, a prospect her greediness did not like to consider, as she sat there slyly watching him, clothed in that easy, cheerful, even tempered strength of his.

Erna and Nielsen did not leave the latter's workshop until close upon midnight. The rest of the time had passed swiftly and pleasantly. Their parting was warm to a decided degree. And they made an appointment for the following Friday evening.

"I'll be a night owl soon," she complained.

"Oh no—you'll always be a Rat-wife," he corrected.

She pressed the book under her arm—Ibsen's "Little Eyolf," which he had lent her — and laughed.

"Now, don't forget my text," he warned her gently, as they stood on the dark street corner near Landsmann's, their hands clasped in friendly embrace.

"I won't."

"And if there's any real trouble with Landsmann?"

"Yes, I will," she agreed.

He pressed her hand.

"Good-night," she said.

"Good-night," he returned.

And they separated. But they both looked back twice and waved their hands—in the old fashioned way.

IX

"An order of mocha tart, Erna!"

It was Bainbridge Breen who had spoken. The girl left the dining room with a cheery: "All right!" The young artist turned to his friends, Carstairs and Nielsen, who were sitting with him at the rear table: "Mocha tart is still the prince of Landsmann pastries."

"You've made up with Erna, I see," Nielsen ventured quietly.

"Oh, of course! I'm too busy a man to spend any time harboring animosity. Besides, I guess I'm sufficiently broad-minded to forgive the girl her indiscretion."

"And on her side, she's too light-hearted to hold animosity," the author supplied.

"I expect so," Breen agreed generously, and then challenged: "But how about *you* and Erna? And how about your story?"

"Haven't been able to finish it as yet," Nielsen returned somewhat evasively.

"Haven't had enough opportunity for *studying* Erna?"

"No, I'm not quite through."

Breen laughed significantly, and Carstairs flushed.

"Then you haven't reached your decision as regards Erna's morals?" the painter continued.

"Not just yet!" was Nielsen's response, keyed in deeper evasiveness.

"You'll reach my conclusion absolutely," Breen closed confidently. "She's a moral little thing."

"Of course," Carstairs interposed indignantly.

"Whoop-la!" cried Breen. "So you've come to *your* decision, Brother John? How did it happen, you sly dog?"

"I haven't come to any decision," Carstairs denied wearily. "I told you in the beginning what I thought of Erna."

"That's so," Breen gave in with a tone of fatherly wisdom. "But when and where did you find opportunity to strengthen your belief? You haven't been coming here very often of late?"

"That's my affair," Carstairs retorted.

He was in a melancholy mood. Erna had been neglecting him since their evening together. Moreover, she had treated him with more or less indifference as well, as though his visits bored her, and had allowed him no opening for inviting her again.

Nielsen wisely changed the subject: "Been doing much work lately, John?"

"Yes, I've been busy."

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"What are you doing?"

"I've been writing a little set of piano songs," he rejoined.

"Good for you!" Breen applauded. "There's nothing like work after all, and we all seem engaged to that lady at present. She's the best wife in the world."

Nielsen smiled philosophically, but the tired expression had revisited Carstair's face. The trio continued eating their supper, and the conversation strayed to other and less personal topics.

That same evening, Erna was to meet Jimmy Allen. The hero of Landsmann's was well ahead of their appointment time, for he was strangely excited. He had some news to impart to Erna.

She was ten minutes late. He did not call her attention to the fact, but greeted her boisterously and began: "Gee, Erna! I got great news for you."

"Have you?" she replied with well feigned indifference.

"What do you think? Nolan's offered to let us have the rooms free for one month."

"Did he?"

"Sure! What do you think o' that? Ain't he the pippin? Ain't he the classy guy?"

She did not answer. They were walking slowly.

He grabbed her arm. "What's the matter now?" he demanded.

"Nothin'."

"You said you'd made up your mind," he maintained anxiously.

"I said: not quite," she corrected him.

"Oh, but you have, Erna," he pleaded. "You'll join hands with me? You're sick o' Landsmann's. You—we're stuck on each other, an' the minister's—Well, wait'll you see the flat!" he broke off. "That'll settle it. Wait'll you see the *flat*!"

"Why?"

"I'm takin' you there," he informed her eagerly.

"Now?"

"Of course!" he cajoled her. "You'll come, won't you?" and he squeezed her arm. "There's no harm in it. You don't have to like the place? It don't hurt to see it?"

"No."

"Then we'll go."

Erna was busy eyeing a millinery show window.

"How about it?" he questioned.

"All right."

He sighed with relief and satisfaction.

There were two rooms and a bath. The furnishings were fairly attractive—garish in some respects,

but on the whole, adequate. Erna admitted to herself that they surpassed her expectation, the garish qualities, no doubt, appealing to her love of life and violent color. But she made no such admission to Jimmy.

He was watching her with wide open eyes. Gradually, his anxiety forsook him and his natural cheerfulness appeared. "Well?" he asked quietly.

Erna continued reticent. Neither of the rooms compared with Mr. Nielsen's, which was so wonderfully cosy, but she could easily improve them. Her woman's housekeeper instinct declared itself; it would be nice to occupy herself making changes here and there. And it would be a nice place to spend a few lazy hours every day, it was such a fine little apartment. Best of all, it would be her first home. . . . Erna studied the large couch for the first time and hesitated. "Stick to your freedom!" he had advised her. Marriage? No, marriage would not be so nice. Still, strong, broad shouldered, handsome, happy Jimmy was standing right near her. She glanced his way.

"Well?" he repeated.

Erna looked away.

"What's the matter?" he asked, and approached a little.

She did not answer. . . . That other time matters

were different. She had not felt as drawn to him then as she had since his return. His offer of money that day—well, it had been an honest one: he had cared for her, and he had been her best friend in those days. She must do him that much justice. And he was offering her much more now. She hated Landsmann's more and more. She could not endure the place many days longer. And this would be her first home. But suppose she should want to change—as she had done so often before, due to her hatred of any steady existence? Her hands would be tied. Marriage meant loss of freedom. She cared for Jimmy, yes, but not quite enough. If she were only given more time for a decision! Perhaps, Mr. Nielsen would help her to decide. But she would not ask *him*.

“What's the matter?” Jimmy demanded once more and with returning anxiety. He came closer.

Erna turned toward him. She cast aside the part she usually played with him, and gave him the first honest glance he had received from her in several days. He quickly put his arm about her shoulders.

Erna turned her head away and tried to pull back, but his other arm found its way about her. “Erna!” he begged for the last time.

She commenced to struggle. His instincts of battle were aroused; and his exasperation of nearly two

years' standing seized this opportunity. Heedless of her cries, he tightened his grip and pressed her breast against his with brutal strength. There was a moment of tugging and swaying. Suddenly, Erna raised her face, and he kissed her mouth with the same undeniable brutality. The girl no longer struggled. But he would not let her go.

At length, she tried to break away, but his strength was much greater than hers. He continued to weaken her, strong and stubborn though she was, by more unmerciful kisses and embraces. Erna attempted to beat his breast with what freedom her hands were permitted and not succeeding, kicked his shins. But Jimmy, laughing with joy and suffering with passion, hugged her with such finality that she was left powerless.

As usual, that old but simple law of physics, concerning the continued contact of bodies, was vindicated. Soon after, it was satisfied. Erna and Jimmy did not rise from the couch for nearly three hours.

Erna was tired, but happy. She looked at Jimmy. He laughed. She laughed too. And then they laughed together. Suddenly, she became serious.

"What's the trouble?" he questioned.

Erna looked at him differently now, but her seriousness soon fled. After all, just as posing for

Breen had not been quite new to her, so her present experience was not quite new. Furthermore, Erna possessed unlimited gameness. Life had never been able to throw her for a long fall. Therefore, her boldness returned. Jimmy laughed as before, and she joined him once more.

"All right?" he requested.

"Yes!"

He got up. She watched him dress. He was slow and careless in the performance. But her attention was absorbed by the muscular play of his splendid body.

"Well?" he asked smiling.

"Well what?" she challenged.

"What makes you stare?"

"Nothin'!"

"Am I nothin'?"

"Yes!"

He laughed with his usual readiness, and content, turned his back on her with lazy ease and walked over to the mirror. Erna frowned slightly. Somehow, his "I" had put her on her old guard. It seemed to spell property, as did his care-free satisfaction with himself. Erna watched him with glances sharpened by caution.

But it was necessary to dress. She was beginning

to feel chilly. Without getting up, she slipped on her waist, that had been lying nearby on the floor.

Jimmy Allen's mood had reached a state of hopeless disregard. He committed a decided blunder. With cheerful candor, he asked, without troubling himself to turn around: "Erna! When do we move in?"

She gave his back an indignant glance. "What did you say?"

"I said: when do we move in?"

Her instinct was up in arms. Throwing coolness into her reply, she returned deliberately: "Not until doomsday."

He stopped fixing his tie. But he continued: "You're gettin' crazy again."

"I'm not," she replied without changing her tone. "I said: not until doomsday."

He turned toward her, smiling. But the smile left his face. "What's the matter now?" he asked, coming forward.

"Go on dressin'!" she commanded, his smile having started her petulance.

He, however, had come over to the couch and now stood over her, staring at her stupidly. She looked up at him, animosity in her glance. His vapid expression deepened.

"Well?" she challenged.

"Sore?" he asked humbly.

"No!"

He tried to study her. Gradually, light penetrated his cloudy understanding: Erna was just like other women. Luckily, some stroke of intuition prompted him not to turn away this time. Instead, he put his hands on her shoulders and said with unaccustomed seriousness: "Erna! Don't be sore."

"I'm not sore," she resented.

"I know—but—"

"You don't have to explain," she cried melodramatically. Strange to say, Erna seemed ready to cry.

At a loss, Jimmy tried philosophy: "'Cause life is Hell to some folks, Erna, we don't have to imitate 'em, do we?" He could not tell whether she was listening. "Gimme a chance!" he added more cheerfully. "Quit the beanery an' gimme a chance! I don't want life to be Hell for you. Gimme the chance, won't you?" He waited, but she did not look up. "You listenin'?"

"Yes," she said.

"Then quit the beanery, Erna! We can live nice an' cosy an' happy here, can't we? You like it here?"

"Yes," she admitted.

"Let's get the minister then!" he concluded quietly.

She removed his hands from her shoulders.

"Erna!" he repeated.

"Wait a moment," she cut him short, although in a milder tone.

"Stick to your freedom!" he had advised her. He was so human that he understood everything. And yet, Jimmy—if she were not forced to decide so soon!

Her strength came back under the influence of this tonic. A little of her innate cheerfulness revived as well. She looked up at Jimmy. His puzzled expression disappeared, and he smiled in encouragement. She smiled too.

"Got somethin' to say," he read. "What is it?"

"Marriage'd be Hell, Jimmy," she announced without emotion.

"Why?" he demanded abruptly, but recollecting himself, stopped. Dimly, he once more realized that Erna was a woman. And the man's psychology assisted him: Nature and his long enduring exasperation had been satisfied. Why worry his head trying to understand Erna? Let her take care of herself. She would outgrow her present mood. He grew blasé, and repeated quietly: "Why?"

"I dunno," she explained doubtfully. "Just because, I suppose."

He sat down beside her, not so much to help her wrestle with the problem as to encourage her to speak. She was thoughtful. "I guess I don't want to," she continued, but with increasing doubt.

"You don't want to marry? Why?"

"I wouldn't be free," she declared in an uncertain way.

"Why not?" he demanded. "You'd be free? You could do what you want. I wouldn't stop you?"

She shook her head.

An idea came to him. "Maybe you'd rather—" but he stopped, remembering a former experience.

"Go ahead," she advised him.

"You'll get sore again," he protested.

"No, I won't," she disagreed, but anticipated him with: "I know what you were goin' to say."

"You do? Well?"

Erna averted her glance. The old thoughts passed in quick review: Landsmann's — Mr. Nielsen's advice—scraps of the past—home. She could live with him a little while and then marry him if all went well. That seemed best for her.

"Wait'll to-morrow!" he interrupted her.

"You're kind o' up in the air now. You'll be surer to-morrow."

She nodded absent-mindedly.

"You'll let me know to-morrow?"

"Yes."

"Sure?"

"Yes."

"All right! Forget it! We'll get it all settled to-morrow. An' if you'd still want to have the minister—"

She shook her head negatively. Jimmy appeared just as well satisfied. He did not understand, but what was the difference, and what the use of worrying? "You love me, don'tcher?"

Again, she nodded absent-mindedly. He pushed her with rough good nature. Presently, he got up, returned to the mirror and again busied himself with his tie. Erna likewise continued dressing. She had reached a decision. And she was cheerful once more. But she would wait until to-morrow. It might be better.

X

Mollie and Gretchen, the Landsmann waitresses, were gossiping. It was about eight o'clock, the next morning. Above the rattle of dishes in the kitchen, this is what one might have overheard:

"Yes, I saw her with him."

"So did I a few nights ago."

"They must go out every night."

"Of course! She's out every night since he's back. Who else would she go with?"

"It's just like her."

"Yes! I always said she'd go back to 'im."

"It was *me* said that."

"Maybe you did, but I said it first. She's a fine girl to be workin' in an honest place like this to be goin' out with a common prize-fighter."

"Not to have any more self-respect!"

"Yes! I always said she'd come to a bad end."

"Looks that way!"

Their gossiping might have continued indefinitely had not part of it been heard by an eavesdropper. She came stealthily into the kitchen and of a sudden, the waitresses received some resounding slaps. The pair screamed.

Erna called them one or two unquotable names and tried to continue her attack. But she saw Landsmann coming into the kitchen and beat a retreat into the dining room, although not without this parting shot: "So you're the kind I've been givin' dresses to!"

Herr Landsmann was a busy man. Both waitresses were trying to explain at the same time. And Mollie was weeping violently. At length, he succeeded in holding an excited consultation with the girls, and with him at their head, they marched out into the store in ragged single file. The trio hurriedly argued the case before Mrs. Landsmann, who was standing behind the counter, guarding the cash register. Pretty soon, Mollie cried: "Here he comes now!"

Jimmy Allen entered. He greeted the Landsmanns and the waitresses and then some of his friends, as he passed the store tables. "How about Young Walcott?" called one. "Next Wednesday," Jimmy returned. "Trainin' again?" "Yes, I start to-day." And the young hero penetrated the kitchen and stepped down into the dining room.

Erna was in a disordered state. Some of the customers were endeavoring to pacify her, but she refused their offers. She spied Jimmy and throwing

down all caution, hurried over to him. He soon heard enough details.

The young man struck a melodramatic pose. "We'll clear out o' this hole," he exclaimed. She put her hand on his arm, but he shook it off. "Go up-stairs an' pack your things!"

"But Jimmy—"

"Never mind!" he interrupted. "You don't have to stay here. If you did, it'd be different. Go up-stairs an' pack up!"

She looked at him with momentary dread, but Jimmy waved his hand toward the doorway. Two of the customers got up to interfere, but he gave them threatening glances. Erna moved away and then stopped in uncertainty. "Go ahead!" he ordered her. She tried to go, but Landsmann stood in the doorway. His face was struggling between anger and dignity.

"Erna!" he commanded.

She stared at him.

"Go right up-stairs and—"

The storekeeper noticed Jimmy's threatening attitude and hesitated. "Go on!" that individual encouraged him. "Got any more to say?"

Evidently, the German had not.

"Then get 'er money ready an' see there ain't a cent short, you lousy Dutchman! I'll see she gets

her desserts. Hurry up, you fat slob, or I'll help you!"

Herr Landsmann disappeared and so did Erna. Jimmy, master of the moment, gave the dining room denizens a look of contemptuous pride and likewise went out.

Consternation prevailed. Each patron wanted to express an opinion, and argument rose high. Only one of them held his peace: John Carstairs. He sat aloof, a picture of gloom and stupor.

.

It was an early hour that evening. Carstairs was seated at the piano in his small cosy room. The gas was turned fairly low. Except for intermittent sounds from the instrument, the room was quiet.

The young man was composing. Vague measures, desolate of all cheer, followed one another in funeral tempo. The monotony, unbroken by even one note of prophecying gladness, was maddening. But the young man persisted in his lugubrious incantation. Presently, he got up, turned the gas a little higher and sat down again. A sheet of music paper lay in front of him. Only a few measures and the title—Dirge—had been transcribed. He started jotting down more notes.

There was a knock at the door. He did not hear

it. The knock was repeated. Carstairs struck a petulant dissonance, arose wearily, went over to the door and opened it part way.

"Special delivery!" a man announced.

Carstairs signed the slip, the postman went away and the door was closed. The young composer examined the handwriting and quickly tore open the envelope. The note was very short.

He gave way to eager joy. And he breathed a name twice over: "Elsie!" Nervous animation betrayed him further. He re-read the note five or six times, looked about in bewilderment and re-read the note again. Of a sudden, he hurried over to the bureau and pulled open the bottom drawer. A litter of odds and ends was laid bare. With anxious haste, he threw them all about on the floor. At last, he came to a picture: the photograph of a pretty girl. His joy deepened; he held the picture at arm's length and gazed a fill of delight. He then arighted himself, went over to the piano, moved the photograph of an older woman to one side and placed this picture near the centre. He was soon occupied studying the effect, and ultimate satisfaction was his.

He again sat down at the piano, but was unable to take his glance from the picture. Eventually, he smiled, gave the picture an *au revoir* look and again turned his attention to the keyboard and manuscript.

He had decided to finish his composition just the same. The dirge continued intoning its gloomy measures, but a note of prophesying gladness appeared. From time to time, too, the composer stole shy glances at the photograph.

.

In a cosy room in a building not far away, a different scene was taking place. Eric Nielsen and Erna Vitek were sitting close together on a couch, chatting confidentially and bantering each other.

Erna had not broken off her appointment with the young writer even though a sudden change had come into her life. Luckily, Jimmy was away all afternoon, training up in Fordham, and, thanks to his continued absence, she was able to leave their flat shortly after six o'clock. She would only stay out an hour or so and, should he return before her, would tell him that she had to visit Landsmann's for some small articles she had left behind. On the way to Nielsen's, she bought two or three trifles. Fortunately, she had found him at home, although she was two hours beforehand.

He had heard of the morning's event and was heartily sorry. But Erna quickly reassured him. Of course, he did not believe the hazy part of her story,—that she was "stayin' with some friends"—but his

philosophy was equal to the occasion: what Erna hid from him was no concern of his. In all, they had been spending a delightful evening. As a consequence, Erna was staying much longer than she had planned.

Nielsen enjoyed her company. She was a splendid stimulant to his stimulant-craving mental system. After his recent intercourse with the every-day woman and the every-day man,—a monotonous gallery of drab souls—she was a touch of brilliant color. Her joy, animal spirit and fighting instinct enthralled him. She stimulated his imagination particularly and consequently brought him back to his old interest in his life and work. So he was trebly indebted to her.

Erna's greed had developed rapidly, and she had grown reckless in short order. Nielsen inspired her complete confidence. He did not take her too seriously, neither did he take her too lightly. This was just what she had craved so long. As a result, at the height of her confidence and his bantering comment, she allowed him to sit next to her, and they developed their further intimacy. For the present, she had forgotten Jimmy. He was physical and did not inspire her as Nielsen's human temperament did so easily and so quietly. Moreover, her Vitek blood had been excited.

ERNA VITEK

Therefore, it was inside a natural sequence of happenings that Nielsen's arm stole about Erna's waist and that she submitted to the liberty. To tell the truth, Nielsen was decidedly under the influence of the wine in her nature and she under that in his.

"Isn't this wicked?" he questioned pleasantly.

"No," she denied.

"But it's growing darker," he protested.

"So much the better!" she retorted.

And they both laughed.

"This is rat time," he warned her.

"I don't care," she vaunted.

And they laughed again.

Erna did not leave the Nielsen workshop until well after nine o'clock.

XI

It was the following Monday noon. Breen and Nielsen were seated at the last table in Landsmann's rear dining room, eating and gossiping. "Gretchen!" called the former.

Erna's successor came forward.

"Bring me a mocha tart, please."

"Yes, sir"—and the girl walked away.

"So you think you'll be able to finish your story?" Breen questioned.

"I think so," was Nielsen's thoughtful response. "I've found the missing link."

"But is any story ever finished?" Breen protested. "Can't you always find room for additional installments?"

Not being in an argumentative mood, Nielsen quietly accepted his friend's criticism. Soon, they were both meditative. Gretchen brought the mocha tart and went away. Hers was a peace-loving temperament, in distinct contrast to Erna's, an opinion Breen expressed. Nielsen again accepted his criticism.

"After all," the artist added comfortably:

"Erna was quite a study. I confess, she fooled me."

"How so?"

"By running off with that young gladiator."

"Then you think she's living with him?"

"Of course. What other conclusion should I come to?"

Nielsen did not answer. At length he said: "Then you're ready to alter your decision of the other day?"

"That she's a moral little thing?" Breen replied.

"Yes, to some extent," he declared generously. "Her last act does change my first consideration a bit. But I still refuse to credit her with being *unmoral*."

"Which means that you believe her *immoral*?" Nielsen ventured in a droll tone.

"I suppose so."

"Explain yourself!"

"She's accepted a life contrary to Society's code or her own code—if she was ever unconventional enough to have one, which I doubt."

Nielsen smiled. "If what you say is true, we're all of us more or less immoral."

"Why so?"

"Because every one barter his soul some time during his existence, and some of us are doing so all the

time. At heart, you know, we're most of us, unmoral, in appearance, moral, but in action, immoral."

Breen laughed in amiable derision. "What scrambled egg philosophy!" he cried. "Where did you learn it, noble scholar?"

"Nowhere," Nielsen answered and frowned. But his ready good nature intervened and he observed gently: "At any rate, Breen, I disagree with you regarding Erna."

"That she's neither moral nor immoral?"

"She has a little bit of each—like all of us," the young author agreed; "but fundamentally she's unmoral."

"Bravo! So that will be the end of your story?"

"I don't know," Nielsen silenced him and smiled a second time.

Breen shook his head with a knowing air. After an interval, he requested: "Will you see her again?"

"I'm not certain," Nielsen said without emotion. "I imagine I will some time. But it won't be necessary."

The young men finished their meal.

A little later, Nielsen was alone in his studio. He was sitting at his small writing desk, looking over some material that lay in front of him. Presently, he seemed worried, but only for a moment. No, the

point was absolutely clear. Erna had settled it for him the other evening. At heart, she was unmoral. The young author commenced writing.

Through some insidious channel, a thought managed to come between his mind and the manuscript: would he see her again? Quickly, he beat it down: it would be unnecessary to see her again; there was nothing more for him to learn. Still, he had enjoyed himself the other evening. The physical, so glorious, so great, had once more penetrated his life. Would he drive it away? Nielsen stopped writing.

Almost resentfully, he mused: What had he and the physical to do with each other? The physical gave him new experience, yes, but it was almost always experience that he courted and utilized for his work. He must not expect more; he must continue to sacrifice everything—thought, emotion, volition—to work. Nothing else existed; in no other way could he hope to reach the realm of artist. He must drive Erna and the other evening's sensations from his memory. She had served as his model, no more; so he must not permit her personality or his own to interfere again. Furthermore, he must be cautious on her behalf as well. She was a joyous, healthy animal. Jimmy Allen was a joyous, healthy animal. They were mated, and were living together, un-

doubtedly. The chapter was closed. He must not desire more.

Nielsen tightened his resolve. In another moment, he was again busy, writing.

There was a knock at the door. He did not hear it. The knock was repeated more loudly. He looked around petulantly, got up, went over to the door and opened it. "Oh, it's you," he said, but not with cordiality.

Erna came in.

"I was down in the neighborhood," she apologized.

"You were right to come up," he reassured her, sorry to have treated her discourteously. "Take off your things!"

"But you're busy," she protested.

"Not at all. Only a little touch or two I was working on. They can wait."

Reluctantly, Erna permitted him to help her remove her coat. She did not take off her hat. "Sit down," he advised her, his regret for his momentary show of self-interest developing.

She sat down on a chair. He seated himself at his desk, but faced her. "What's new?" he asked pleasantly.

"Nothin' much," she returned and glanced at him.

His glance met hers, and he quickly looked elsewhere. He felt a sharp pain: he had gone too far the other evening. Erna likewise looked away. She had seen enough; her instinct knew. There was an awkward pause.

Nielsen gave her a sidelong glance. What could he do? This was dreadful. He should not have gone so far. Erna was staring at the floor. He could see her pugnacious nose and her determined mouth and chin, and felt somewhat relieved. Her case might not be as serious as he feared. She had tenacious strength of character. But the situation was very uncomfortable notwithstanding. He should not have gone so far. It was selfish—whether a man's selfishness or an artist's. Nielsen turned away.

Again, he glanced in her direction, but she was still staring at the floor. Luckily, she had Jimmy; they were living together—at least, he had taken that much for granted by putting her story and the bakery scandal side by side. They were suited to each other. What could or should she have to do with such a thing as an artist? Perhaps, the novelty in their short affair had appealed to her. She was a greedy nature. She craved everything: sun, moon, stars and all. He himself had only been one of

them. This conjecture satisfied him considerably. And he breathed with returning freedom.

She looked up. He smiled. She smiled too. And he breathed still more freely.

"What have you been doing lately?" he questioned cheerfully.

"I've been busy straightenin' out," she replied, and looked at him.

He moved restlessly. There was a second pause, but only a short one.

"You've been busy too," she said.

"Oh yes, I—I've been working on a story."

"What kind of a story?"

"Merely a foolish little affair about a foolish little affair," he hastened to condemn.

Her glance dropped. His work and her own lived apart. "I brought back 'Little Eyolf'."

"So I saw. Did you like it?"

"Not very much."

"Why not?"

"It's too sad," she explained. "An' I don't like cripples."

"Of course!" he broke out. "I forgot that you love only joy and happy people."

"An' freedom," she concluded unconsciously.

"Certainly, and freedom," he agreed.

He caught a glimpse of her eyes—eyes that could

love you to-day and hate you to-morrow—and felt still more reconciled with circumstances. Erna craved freedom, and was free. She could take care of herself. She possessed that rare thing, the life-controlling temperament. Perhaps, she would not need even Jimmy Allen. How splendid she was! Would she hate him to-morrow? It would be a shame. He had only to raise his hand—and they could continue. But he must not, it would be so much better for her. She would be miserable with him: an artist and not a physical man. She belonged to Jimmy—and still more, to herself. He must not interfere, but leave her destiny to destiny. Nielsen felt almost completely relieved.

“You *love* your work, don’t you?” Erna announced with unexpected candor.

Nielsen looked at her with sharpened eyes. She was glorious. She had emphasized “love” and not “work.” He could scarcely reply.

“Don’t you?” she repeated.

She was more than glorious. Her own gameness had fought the problem for her. She required assistance from no one.

“Yes,” was all he was able to say, his emotions crowding him.

“Do you write a whole lot?”

“Yes, lots and lots, but it’s all trivial.”

"Oh no!" she contradicted him.

"Oh yes!" he mimicked her, and laughed, although he did not know why. "My writings are as much like life—" as you are like art, he would have finished, but hesitated.

"As what?" she assisted him.

"As the catching of butterflies is like the catching of rats," he closed with a return to himself.

"Oh, the Rat-wife!" she interpreted.

"Yes."

"You're not a rat-wife writer then?"

"No."

"You're not a butterfly writer either?"

"Why not?"

"'Cause butterflies come from caterpillars, don't they?"

"Yes," Nielsen admitted and laughed again, although his emotions were threatening him, as before. "I forgot about the caterpillars."

"Yes, I hate 'em," she reminded him. "They're too—too—"

"Fuzzy wuzzy!" he helped her.

"Yes," she accepted and laughed for the first time, if not very heartily.

Nielsen studied her with frank admiration. Her nature was that of a lioness. She looked capable of pushing over or slipping from under any circum-

stance. She did not even require one's sympathy. And still?— But he resisted the temptation. For her sake, it would be better not to continue.

"I must be goin'," she said suddenly.

"Oh no, not yet!" he begged.

"Yes, I must be goin'," she insisted and got up. "I got shoppin' to do."

"Haven't you finished decorating?" he inquired, and got up against his will.

"No," she returned and smiled.

Nielsen helped her with her coat. He was tempted to put his arms about her, but resisted. It would make her departure more difficult. She turned around. "Is my hat on straight?"

"Oh yes," he assured her and added, by way of controlling himself: "*Vanitas vanitatum!*"

"What's that?"

"More triviality!" he declared.

Erna started toward the door, but he stopped her with: "Don't you want another book to read?"

The temptation was a strong one, but she dodged it: "No, I'll be too busy now. Maybe, later on," she concluded with a lingering tone.

Nielsen looked away. Erna continued toward the door, but he hurried after her and opened and held it open for her.

"Good-bye," she said.

"Oh no, not good-bye, but *au revoir!*" he quoted gently.

"That's a hard word to pronounce."

"Try it anyhow," he encouraged her.

"Orrevore!"

"Fine!" he congratulated her, repeated the phrase, and added: "Come in again soon."

"Yes," she agreed.

But she never did.

XII

Two months passed.

Erna Vitek was still living with Jimmy Allen. There was, however, less and less likelihood that they would ever marry. In fact, the most probable issue to their affair was that they would separate again, in the near future and this time for good.

Erna was tired of Jimmy. For some weeks past, her restless nature had been craving some one else, or better still, some other mode of living, her present one having reached a state of unbearable monotony. She recovered from her experience with Eric Nielsen only after several weeks of struggle. Even such a fine tonic as that supplied her so freely by her resource of blood found the healing of her wound no ordinary matter, but she had recovered, except for an occasional memory. Her battle with her craving for Nielsen did not assist her attachment for Jimmy; on the contrary, the latter degenerated by contrast. And Jimmy, himself, was very much to blame as well. He had changed toward her.

It is no doubt true that possession often breeds boredom, and boredom, carelessness. Erna, before possession and after possession, was not the same

individual, and Jimmy treated her accordingly. He was no longer an anxious desire-maddened suitor.

Furthermore, he was softening physically. He continued training for his schedule of fistic contests and carried out that schedule; he defeated Young Walcott, the man from Chicago and another, but lately, had fought two very poor draws, in the latter of which he, himself, was on the point of being knocked out. His manager, the astute Jerry Nolan, was losing patience with him. He bluntly attributed his protégè's decline to the fact that he was "livin' with a woman. A man's got to cut out drink if he wants to succeed as a athlete, but he's got to be *sure* to cut out women. They sucks his blood an' strength."

Jimmy did not agree with this sentiment. He continued to live with Erna. What is more, he had threatened to move out of the Nolan apartment and "to throw up the sponge"—quit the prize-ring—if his manager persisted in arguing along these lines. Although Nolan submitted, he found other grounds upon which to pick quarrels with Jimmy. The truth is, the young manager was ambitious, and Jimmy's ability to climb the pugilistic ladder reflected credit upon him. He had always felt and expressed his faith in his protégè and prophesied that he would be "mixin' it with the top notchers" not far hence,

a prophecy Jimmy substantiated by defeating "the Kid," Young Walcott and the westerner so decisively. But he was in danger now, as his recent battles and his late mutiny testified. Should Jimmy fall from grace a second time, it would be irrevocably. Therefore, Nolan was using eloquence, persuasion, threats, anything, to save him.

Many of their quarrels took place in Erna's presence. After a while, Jimmy, much to her growing distaste, formed the habit of bringing Nolan and "some o' the boys" to the flat. Custom gradually trained them to believe that she was nothing more than part of the furniture, and they accepted her attentions, due them as Jimmy's guests, just so. They stayed well on into the night, amused themselves, played pranks, broke dishes, quarrelled, made up—and came again. And more and more, they looked upon Erna with contempt. On her side, she hated and despised them.

During the day, Jimmy was usually absent, training at the Nolan headquarters in Fordham. Erna saw him for a moment in the morning, when she prepared his breakfast, and at evening, when she prepared his supper, not to see him again, as a rule, until fairly late at night, except when he brought "the boys." To be sure, she slept with him and—

well, she hated that too. It made her feel herself some dirty, inferior animal.

Erna's days were still more monotonous. She sewed quite a little, attended to details of house work, which were few, and otherwise, took long walks or went to an afternoon vaudeville or moving picture show. As she was accustomed to a day of constant labor and occupation, she had never known much idleness; her evenings were spent in resting or in the search of a little excitement. Moreover, Erna's was purely an emotional nature; she did not possess the intellect or imagination so requisite toward making idleness useful. Unfortunately, she had no friends to visit.

At first, Jimmy gave her money in regular installments. Their house expenses paid, she would have a sufficient balance with which to indulge herself—with a new hat, a new dress, a few odds and ends, or her afternoon amusements. The installments, however, were more and more irregular and smaller in amount; last week, none had materialized. The reason was this: Jimmy had returned to drinking. And the climax was impending. One night, he came home late, pretty well drunk.

Erna opened the door. He swayed and then staggered into the room, a broad leer on his face. "Howsh—the—girl?" he demanded stupidly.

He tried to embrace her, but Erna stepped back, and he nearly fell. With an effort, he straightened himself and laughed. "Wha—whash—a—matter?"

Erna's resentment poured over. "You beast!" she said in low tones.

"You—what?" He leaned forward to hear better.

"Beast, I said," and she pelted him with epithets and reproaches.

Jimmy made several ludicrous attempts to apologize, and protested: "I—I'm not—d-drunk; I—I'm just—ossified." And he laughed more stupidly and tried to approach.

"Keep away!"

"Wha—whash—a—matter?"

"Keep away!"

"Wheresh—No—Nolan?"

"Nolan's in hell, where he belongs," she cried angrily, and a second tirade followed, directed this time at the manager and Jimmy's friends.

"Be c-c-careful!" he interrupted, but she added further condemnation. "Be c-c-careful!" he repeated. "No—Nolan's a frien' o' mine an' so's P-p-piggy Wallace. Be c-c-careful!"

His defence only succeeded in infuriating her. She concluded with two or three judgments that in-

cluded the families of those gentlemen. Jimmy's good nature stopped. "You ——!" he called her and stumbled toward her.

Erna retreated, her face aflame. Once more, he called her —— and fell toward her. She tried to ward him off, for he had driven her against the couch. But Jimmy pushed himself forward and raising his fist, brought it down clumsily upon her face. Erna slipped and fell upon the couch, her mouth bleeding.

Furious, she jumped up and attacked Jimmy. He was in a defenceless condition, and blows rained upon his shoulders, body and head. He tried to raise his guard, but it was useless. At length, swearing incoherently, she struck him full in the face, and he swayed, mumbled stupidly and toppled over on the couch, unconscious or asleep—more likely the latter. Handsome Jimmy was a disgusting sight.

Erna, still struggling with herself, looked down at him. He started snoring, a part painful, part beatific smile wrinkling his face. His legs were dangling over the side of the couch. She gave them a kick, lifted them and shoved them onto the couch. She then turned away and wiped her mouth with her sleeve. Erna had come to a simple determination.

Without hesitation, she went over to a closet and

opened the door. She likewise pulled open the drawer of a commode. And somewhere, she found an old suit case and dragged that forth. Her packing did not last more than twenty minutes. She left a hat, a dress and some odds and ends behind her.

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One pleasant late afternoon about two weeks later, Eric Nielsen was occupied in writing at his desk. He was engaged on an essay he had planned and started some time ago. His pencil was moving more rapidly than usual.

The door was opened gently and Bainbridge Breen came in. "Busy?" he inquired.

"Come in! I'll be through in a second," Nielsen returned without looking up.

The painter came forward. The author's pencil scribbled a little faster, a period was jotted down, and he laid aside the pencil, at the same time eyeing his work and sighing with satisfaction.

"Finished?"

"Oh no, not for some time. I've got several thousand words more," Nielsen explained.

"How's it coming on?"

"Splendidly!" was the optimistic rejoinder. "If I can keep sufficient enthusiasm in my body, I ought to be able to carry it through perfectly."

"It'll be your *chef-d'oeuvre*, I suppose," Breen observed with his customary pleasantry.

"I hope so," Nielsen admitted seriously. "It's stronger than anything I've done, I feel. It shows maturity, I think, not only maturity of judgment, but maturity of execution as well."

"In other words, Art," Breen interrupted slyly. "What more do you ask?"

"Nothing," confessed Nielsen, and his warm smile appeared.

"But what's the matter with the story?" the painter demanded.

"How do you mean?" the author retorted.

"I thought *that* had fulfilled your ambition."

"Not quite, not quite," Nielsen hastened to deny, and was thoughtful. "I don't know just what it was, but there was something missing in it," he said gently, and changing the subject, concluded abruptly: "I'm sure I have that something in this essay."

Breen explained himself: "You know what made me ask about the story?"

"No. What?"

"I had lunch in a small bakery on Sixth Avenue this noon."

"Well?"

"Guess whom I saw there?"

"Well?"

"Can't you guess?"

"Out with it!"

"Our old friend: Erna Vitek!"

Nielsen turned and stared at his friend. He was unable to speak.

"What do you think o' that?" Breen pursued, unruffled.

"She must have left Allen."

"Yes!"

"And is working again?"

"Yes!"

Nielsen stared at the floor now. He seemed unable to formulate, much less express, an opinion. "How is she? Changed?" he requested at last.

"Somewhat! She's quite a little harder and a bit more quiet—that is the way matters appeared to me. But her eyes have lost none of their boldness. And besides, she seems to like it there."

"She does?"

"Yes, and she's very popular too."

"How so?"

"The men are very attentive, it looked to me," Breen volunteered significantly.

"And she?"

"She's still got an eye open. Not as wide open,

perhaps, as in the old days, but it isn't closed, that's certain."

Nielsen was silent, reflecting.

At length, Breen asked: "What do you imagine will become of her?"

"How?"

"I mean, of her life—what life do you suppose she'll lead eventually: this young lady so moral, unmoral or—"

"I can't say exactly," Nielsen, who disliked the topic, interrupted.

"Think she'll take to the streets?"

"No, no, not that!" was the vehement denial.

"Why not?"

Again, Nielsen seemed unable to answer, but he boasted unexpectedly: "She's too strong. She has fight in her—and love of freedom."

"But so have street ladies."

"Yes, but they don't carry it through."

"Why not?"

"I don't know," was the stubborn reply. "They don't, that's all."

"Well, do you? Does Tom, Dick or Harry? Does Erna?"

"I don't know. Let's drop the subject."

"I wouldn't be so certain that she does," Breen insinuated, still persisting.

"Of course, *you* wouldn't," Nielsen condemned, unable longer to hold back his emotion. "You're wisdom itself."

The young artist decided to shift the topic: "Heard from Carstairs lately?"

Animation returned to Nielsen. "Yes, I heard from John last night."

"Is he still in Indianapolis?"

"Yes, he has a fine position there and seems contented now."

"And Elsie Pearson?"

"Oh, that'll come off, as you said the other day."

"Marriage?"

"Yes!"

"Good for John! I'm glad he won. He was a long time waiting."

Nelsen nodded. He was thoughtful once more. But he shook off the mood and asked: "What are you doing, Breen?"

"Getting ready for spring."

"That's so—spring'll be here in a week or two. Going out to the country as usual?"

"Yes, I've gathered a bunch of canvases and plenty of tubes, etcetera, and off I'll go."

"Going to Connecticut again?"

"Yes, that's the only country for a landscape painter."

"I suppose so," Nielsen agreed.

"How about supper?" Breen interposed.

"Why, what time is it?"

"After five o'clock."

"By Jove—that late? I must be getting dressed soon."

"Got an engagement?"

"Yes, I'm going to feed with the Plymptons."

"Too bad! That means, I'll have to eat alone. See you in the morning! So long!" and Breen moved away.

"Going over to Landsmann's?"

"Yes. But it's hopelessly dull there these days. It'll give me the incurables to-night."

"Or a tummy-ache, at least," Nielsen added good-humoredly.

"Yes, so long!"

"So long!"

Breen went out quietly and closed the door. Nielsen studied the door with a blank expression. But he shook himself and returned to his manuscript. In a moment, he was absorbed, re-reading.

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